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HIS PASSION FOR EVER

BY *Aloysius*
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S.J. "11

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FOREWORD

THE searching, emotion-rent voice of Roland Hayes picked up that terrible question and repeated it again and again to the listening audience:

"Were you there when they crucified my Lord?"

To many in the well-dressed crowd that had come to hear the great Negro tenor, this was simply the lyric of one of the better Negro spirituals. Yet I felt that to other many it must have been a challenge and a command to the searching of hearts.

Was I there when they crucified my Lord?

Was I present when they wielded the lash and brought down the scourge upon His back?

Was I spectator or — horrible thought — active participant?

After the lapse of years since I heard that commanding voice addressing the souls of an audience, I am again and intimately convinced of the eternal "nowness" of the Passion. The crucifixion of the

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Saviour belongs not alone to one year in the history of our race, one year fated and terrible for a band of otherwise uncorrelated criminals, one year glorious though frightening for the men and the women who believed in the Redemption and its near and intimate effects upon human souls. The scenes that filled the last hours of the Saviour are contemporaneous in any generation. The sins that made those hours necessary to God's plan go on hour after hour. The callous brutality, the urgency of vice, the cries of rejection, the proud acts of faith are part of every day in human history.

Christ died once. Yet in the causes of His death, in its effects upon history, in the place His death occupies in the lives of those who continue murderously to hate the Saviour and of those who love Him more with each remembrance of His death of love, that "once" covers all of time and history.

I was indeed there when they crucified my Lord.

So, too, other men and women who love the Saviour have believed of themselves when they relived the events that surrounded the death of the Man-God. In their meditations they have associated themselves with each of the characters and with all of the cast in that sacred, splendid, shameful, terrifying drama. They have tried to see the faces of the actors, searching them for similarity to themselves. They have known their own responsibility for the tragedy enacted, and in all humility and truth have identified themselves with those who

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worked murder upon the hill. They have asked the dying Saviour to forget that they are individually responsible and to remember how they have tried to stand, no longer with the rejecting mob and the cowardly Pilate, but with Longinus and Dismas of faith, with Mary and John and the Magdalen bringing some comfort to the dying God upon His strange and rugged bed of death.

Recurrently writers have thought of Calvary as the great stage on which was enacted the tragedy of our Redemption.

They have tried to supply the lines that probably were spoken or would have been spoken by the varied actors.

To the meager stage directions of the Gospel narrative they have added their own imagining of what took place and how the events were enacted to the full.

Beyond all else, however, they have thought of themselves as the alert, responsive audience. And like all audiences that enter into the spirit of a great play, they have swiftly come to identify themselves with the action, the movement of events, the lines, the characters who played the great scenes.

Great actors and stage directors have always wished that Shakespeare had written into his dramas full and explicit stage directions. They have wished he had given added clues so that they would know exactly how he wished some speeches delivered,

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what he intended certain actors to do when they made this important statement or rendered this too, too sketchy line.

But on second thought they have realized that Shakespeare was himself a great director and somewhat of an actor. Wisely he did not clutter his plays with explicit gestures and rigid directions for interpretation. Because he allowed such leeway, each great Shakespearean actor has added and continues to add enormously to our appreciation of the dramatic value of the play by his own reading of the lines and his own expression of gesture and movement and action.

We speak of the great actors less by their own names than by the names of the Shakespearean characters they have played. We say, "He is a great Hamlet." . . . "She was a magnificent Lady Macbeth."

So throughout the ages men and women have tried to imagine in what tone of voice Christ uttered the great line, "Father, forgive them. . . ." They have tried to relive the tremendous moment when for the first time a rough human voice cried out, "Lord, remember me when Thou shalt come into Thy kingdom." On the stage of their imagination they have seen the movements of soldiers and mob, priests and faithful few . . . have dared watch the expressions on the face of the dying Christ . . . and the every moment and movement of Mary as she lived those expressions.

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They have watched and imagined . . . and identified themselves with the actors.

They have spoken the lines. They have supplied the gestures. They have known sorrow for the criminal actions that were too clearly theirs. They have asked approval from the Saviour as they played penitent or believing or sympathetic parts.

This small book is another effort to relive the Passion.

In its pages we ask ourselves, in the searching and often alarmingly personal question of the song that Roland Hayes sings, "Was I there when they crucified my Lord?"

If the answer is that great "yes" of faith, the booklet (for it is hardly more) serves its purpose.

No one can be part of the audience on Calvary and not benefit in his own soul.

Any stage director who tries to supply missing business — as he does for a Shakespearean play — to hint at action that accompanied lines, to fill in the speeches that are missing in the rushed and tumultuous movement of the great drama may be of help to an audience.

But the reader is always so much more than mere audience. If he takes toward the drama the attitude that characterizes any responsive member of the audience, he identifies himself with each of the actors and actresses — and eventually with all of them.

Then going back to the sheerly, starkly beautiful

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Passion as it is related in the Gospels, he can do what the saints and the great lovers of Christ have always done — fill in for himself the emotions, expressions, actions, and business that make the tragedy of Calvary live and become an intimate part of his emotional and religious life.

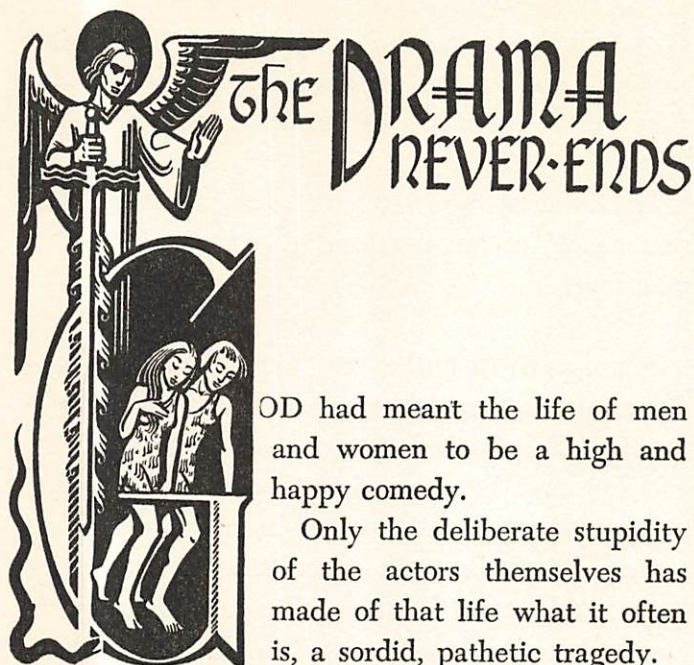
DANIEL A. LORD, S.J.

The Feast of St. Stanislas Kostka, 1949

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OD had meant the life of men and women to be a high and happy comedy.

Only the deliberate stupidity of the actors themselves has made of that life what it often is, a sordid, pathetic tragedy.

God the Creator and great Designer set the stage beautifully for the rising curtain. The first scene was laid against the backdrop and wings of the world's fairest garden. The program read:

Scene — Paradise

Time — A brief period before heaven

Written clearly into the scenario, the description would have run like this:

The curtain rises on a scene of purest delight. The background is a summer sky, and there are roses everywhere. Clearly this is a garden of delights. Tall fruit trees rise within easy reach of the hand. Flower-lined paths lead off to vistas

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of heavily shaded trees squired by blossoming shrubs and watered by small rivers that hum and gurgle on their way to the unknown sea.

Here was a stage set for a prologue of laughter and music, of innocent and dancing and gay human love.

Adam and Eve, the first happy actors in this drama, entered on this scene, we may well believe, dancing. They looked upon the setting for their life and love, and they knew that it was delightfully fair.

More than that: they knew, beautiful as was the setting for this curtain raiser, that a far lovelier stage would open for the real play God had written for their performance. When the present brief scene, *Love in Eden*, had been brought to its happy curtain, a quick scene change would open before them, the stage set for the glorious and eternal drama called *The Beatific Vision*.

But the stupid actors in God's blessed comedy read through the lines of the libretto and then ruthlessly rewrote the play.

They went further: they reset the stage. They scrapped the beautiful garden. And for stage effects, instead of the bright amber and pink of the Lord's light plot, they called for thunder and clouds, the dull grays of winter, and the purples and blacks of threatening storms.

Upon the scene entered the villain, first of a

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million of his breed — oily and smooth, with tricky eyes and darting tongue, and a convincing speech that was cue for rebellion and challenge to tragedy.

"You shall be as gods," he whispered . . . and an echoing rumble of thunder sounded the drum roll of rebellion, the premonitory artillery of the thousand wars that were to come.

A silly little adventuress listened. Then in an almost farcical gesture she took the apple into the very hand from which she carelessly tossed the grace of God and lifted to her lips the bright beauty of the most flavorless of foods — the forbidden fruit.

Then with her arms about the neck of her man, she lured him to partnership in her sin . . . and with him as the dubious star of the piece began the doleful tragedy of the human race.

The world's endless dramatic struggle started at that moment. And like some formless, unending Oriental play, that struggle has continued ever since. A million different scenes, uncounted shifts of characters, but the same tiresome plot. The same basic struggle has gone on.

All drama is based, of course, on struggle.

The few fundamental plots that form the thread of the dramas of all nations are endlessly repetitious: the struggle of love, the struggle of ambition, the struggle of hate, the struggle of greed, the struggle of lust, the struggle of stupidity. The names

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and costumes of the characters change; the stage-sets represent the various and passing nations; the language differs for time and people. But the plots remain tiresomely alike.

The struggle in drama is like the struggle in wrestling matches: the contestants are constantly changing; but the positions are strangely familiar, the grips are endlessly repeated, the groans are tediously alike.

All these dramatic struggles are, of course, part of the great world struggle that is man's most characteristic story.

Good struggles fiercely in the grip of evil.

Man leagues himself with Satan, the perennial villain, who is also the endlessly resourceful prompter, and together they strike at God.

The cue line is whispered, hissed, and shouted and flung like a gauntlet: "You will be as gods." And the hellish prompter hears to his own great satisfaction the human actors in each generation displaying their histrionic powers and emotional gamut in his own great classic line: "I will not serve."

The struggle of evil against good, of man against God, is the plot of plots running through all human drama.

Yet each generation gives the plot the same strange twist — and thinks it has achieved a novelty.

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The struggle proves to be between God's determination that man shall be happy and man's determination that God shall not make him happy. Through creation, providence, redemption, the constant wondrous action of His grace God struggles to make the earth a blessed, beautiful, happy place, on which men and women can live and love and sing and dance in deep happiness. Men and women with an energy and persistence that would have been vast enough to enable them to scale the battlements of heaven resist God's greatest efforts — as they scorn His pleading.

Deliberately they twist life's drama into tragedy, to the undoing of the world.

God's plot called for a gay comedy closing on a happy curtain.

Man's rewrite of the plot, his ridiculous marplot, man's misreading of his lines and reckless destruction of the scenery turn the comedy into tragedy and drop the final curtain on a stage strewn with characters dead in their sin.

The world drama has become through man's constant rewrite a plot based on treason to his King. It is the tearful story of a son's frightful ingratitude toward a devoted Father. Here is sinister betrayal of a Friend by a friend, the fratricidal struggle of brother against a God who would be brother.

The falling action of the drama is the record of a wrecked world. Sin and stupidity seem to struggle

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for the greater motivation. The characters, which are man and woman, sweep downward, the more tragic in their ruin because of the godlike powers that were theirs.

Yet even in a plot grown monotonous with constant repetition of terror and ruin, there can be climaxes of appalling horror and moments when tragedy reaches the last heights of terror and the lowest depths of ruin.

That was the case when mankind mounted the stage of Calvary. Tragedy reached the pinnacle of the drama of Good Friday, in the death of the world's loveliest Hero.

The setting for that scene was suitably perfect in artistry.

A wind-swept hill, bare of shrubbery and baked to a hard, white smoothness, rises like a blanched skull of some prehistoric giant against a blood-red sky. The backdrop is angry storm clouds whipping dull draperies before the dying sun. Darkness is the prevailing color tone, darkness shot through with the stabbing of steel lightning. The cannonade of thunder, echoing the endless senseless battles that men had fought to no good purpose and in the silliest of causes, charges with dread the atmosphere already heavy with tragedy and death.

On stage a chorus chants a grim threnody.

Out of the wings surges the mob, moving to the

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awful rhythm of its perverted litany: "Crucify Him! Crucify Him!" Antiphonally the chorus repeats another rhythm: "His blood be upon us and upon our children!" — His blood be on us all and on the heads of those who call us parents!

The cast of characters is amazingly complete.

New villainy that is so eternally old walks in the person of the priests, suave villains immaculately dressed, rubbing their hands — as Iago was later to do — when they see their thin plot rush forward to the triumph of murder. The thief at the left of the Hero adds the blasphemous lines of articulate evil. The soldiers drive home the nails with the loud sound effects of a mallet that echoes the louder cruelty of their contemptuous laughter. Pilate and Herod and the rich concessionaires of the Temple smile happily as a final lance at last rids them of the petty annoyance of this religious revolutionary.

The Apostles, not present on stage, speak like wan voices from the wings.

The holy women standing in tears about the unfaltering figure of Mary, heroine of the drama, and John, the brave juvenile, lend new and melancholy chorus to the scene.

The surprise characters speak in the voices of the Good Thief and Longinus.

And there was on stage . . . myself. Late is my entrance and contemptible the part I play. But I

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am there. . . . I was there. As audience and actor I was very much part of plot and speech and action.

The plot of that first Good Friday drama seemed merely a high-lighting of the same weary plot that had locked mankind in endless conflict with its Creator.

Evil had surged against clear beauty and shining truth.

Man and the Devil had formed their league against God.

But there was one great difference in the first Good Friday drama: for once the villains seemed to triumph. Man's stupidity seemed to have risen in victory over God's wisdom. The basest of men had slain the purest of men. Rude cruelty had killed the world's kindest benefactor.

In a moment of strangely twisted victory the sons of men had lifted the Son of God and of man upon a cross . . . and then in flight and terror had plunged themselves down Calvary's steep hill.

One element in the drama of the first Good Friday was blessedly the same as in all the other dramas.

The hero was as always the same.

The glorious Hero of Calvary, like the splendid hero of life's long drama, is God Himself. Here as always and ever it is God who is constantly attacked, constantly beaten, constantly thwarted, constantly betrayed.

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Only this time God the Hero wears the costume of a man.

He has disguised Himself as a slave; yet even as a slave He shines forth as the loveliest Hero that ever woke the hearts of followers to enthusiasm and stirred by very goodness the cesspool souls of the evil and of the lustful to envy Him and murder Him. God is held captive by the plot that men have rewritten. He had sought to give mankind the greatest joy; He is the victim of mankind's most evil plot. On the mob movement of His own creatures He is rushed along into the tragedy of ruined mankind.

This, then, is what we call the tragedy of Calvary.

It is the dramatic climax of man's sad history as it nails the Hero to the cross and sees the villains triumph in their bacchanal at the foot of the gibbet.

This is the moment that epitomizes all sad human history. It is less the tragedy of the Hero done to a guiltless death than the tragedy of those who murdered Him. And His murderers are all the sinful men and women who have ever lived.

For all great drama is amazingly true of everyone who sees or reads it. Each great classic play becomes the story not merely of those whose names figure in the cast of characters but of those who sit in the audience. Comfortable or disturbed, callous or tearful, watching with unseeing eyes or

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purged by the passion that they watch, the people in the audience are really one with the actors upon the stage.

So it is that thinking men and women have always felt a close kinship with the great figures in classic tragedy.

All have found in themselves the tragic indecisions of Hamlet.

All have experienced or themselves have expressed the ingratitude whose serpent tooth stung Lear to madness.

In every human soul is weakness enough to make the downfall of Macbeth seem very possible.

A million Fausts each day sell their souls to the Devil in return for an illusion and the fulfillment of a dream.

The tragedy of Calvary is never ended. It repeats itself as long as men sin and know the meaning of their sins. It is relived in every man or woman who stands and watches the ever present murder upon the hill of God's death.

Why should we continue to use the pronouns he and she?

I am constantly present in the tragedy of Calvary.

I sit and watch the drama that belongs to no single age and is confined within the boundaries of no single country.

More than that: *I* am present and acting upon that bloody stage, playing less my personal part

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than the varied roles of the many other actors.

I have over and over again wrecked the happy paradise of sanctifying grace within my soul.

I have in every serious sin leagued myself with the Devil in his bitter struggle with God. I have joined the plotters who for months before the deed was accomplished schemed in the Temple and counted out blood money in the executive offices of those who made money in and from the house of God.

I have refused to let God make me happy; I have run eagerly with the villains who hated God and despised their fellow men.

I have washed my hands in the very basin of water that failed to cleanse Pilate of his responsibility. I have run away, hot on the cowardly heels of the frightened, despairful Apostles. I have cried loud second to the denial of Peter and pursed my lips in Judas' blasting kiss of betrayal.

If I am wise, I shall live my part, my various parts, over and over again.

The tragedy of Calvary is the world's one important drama. It is within my power again to watch that Hero die. It is possible for me to lift to His thirsting lips the cup of my love and grateful faith. I can even choose — whatever the parts I played in times past — the roles that will be mine today.

Attentively I shall listen to the spoken words and

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watch the characters as they move through their parts; I shall accept the role that best becomes me, and I shall play it to the hilt.

And if in times past I have played with appalling "success" the roles of Judas, Herod, Pilate, and the meanest scum in the mob . . . if I have chanted the bloody rhythm of the murderers and laughed with the cruel satisfaction of the priests . . . I need not stop on past performances.

For not all the characters in that tragedy were evil.

There were Mary, the heroine, and John, gallant in the face of Christ's enemies. I can find place with the holy women whose service did not end with disgrace but who followed Him to serve Him when the executioners had finished their work. I can speak with the voice of hope, uttering clearly the stumbling words of the Good Thief. I can repeat the magnificent faith of the captain of the guard, who was a Gentile and the father of the Gentiles who followed the Saviour.

Fortunately for all of us, we can change our roles in this tragic drama. We can put on the costumes of the characters we choose to be. We can, amazingly enough, find in this tragedy of Calvary the very happy ending that God originally wrote into the drama of mankind and now writes again in the red lettering of His blood.

For we must never forget that the final nature of

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each drama is not determined until the fall of the final character.

Does the play leave the leading character ruined or saved? Is he dropped deep into irreparable despair? Or does he smile up into the rising dawn? Is he lost or redeemed?

Here as in the old Italian comedies, we the characters find that we may write our own lines.

Better still: it is possible to recapture the plot as God had meant it to be and play the happy role that God first assigned to the sons and daughters of His love.

What part shall I play in this drama?

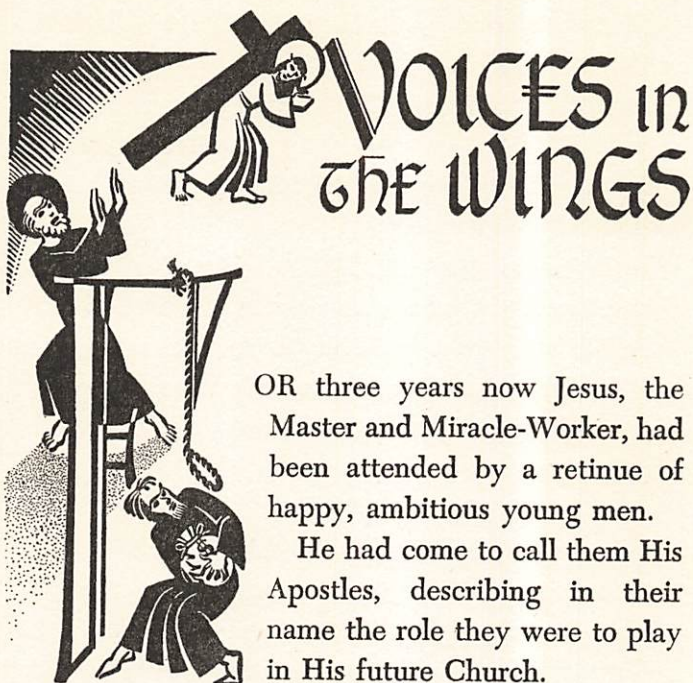
Almost terrified at the enormity of my possible choice, I realize that God lets me determine the ending of my own life's drama. With His grace, now won for me by Him on Calvary, I can write a happy ending and escape the ending of bloody doom.

As the divine Hero plays to conclusion His glorious role, I can snatch from the apparent tragedy of Good Friday the eternal springtime drama of Easter.

Not only can I do all this, but all this is the wish of God, the great dramatic Director.

I pause. In a moment the curtain will rise for me. I stand waiting in the wings.

What part do I choose to play?



OR three years now Jesus, the Master and Miracle-Worker, had been attended by a retinue of happy, ambitious young men.

He had come to call them His Apostles, describing in their name the role they were to play in His future Church.

Someday He would in the fullest meaning of that name *Apostle* send them out to carry His name and His mission to the ends of the earth. They were to be His ambassadors once they had finished their training under His precise and meticulous direction.

They professed loudly their devotion to Him.

They followed Him with adhesive loyalty.

They were His inseparables.

They were all of this, that is, up to the moment of Gethsemani and the opening scenes of His Passion.

For as we search the stage-set for Calvary's tragic denouement, we look almost in vain for those men whom Christ has chosen from all mankind and out

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of all history to be His nearest and most constant companions.

Now they are startlingly absent.

The priests and the leaders of the conspiracy must have noted with real delight and a gloating satisfaction how swiftly these followers fled the prospect of bloodshed. Little, indeed, need be feared from a king's retinue that scatters and flees at the first sight of a drawn sword.

To find the Apostles, we must turn back the kaleidoscope of the Saviour's life drama to a quite different scene and a much earlier setting.

This time the setting is a springtime highway along Galilee's small lakes.

Down the parched, heavily trodden road stride a group of confident young men. Their strides are as easy as their laughter; their conversation is as eager as their hopes. Their eyes sweep the countryside as if it were already conquered and held securely in the name of the new King. Around them is the springtime of the earth of their native land. But high in their souls is the springtime of all that their land had dreamed would come to pass.

No wonder they were happy, confident, utterly sure of themselves and of the good fortune before them.

For their future was guaranteed by the tall young Genius who walked in their lead.

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Just now He was the beloved Friend who had selected them totally without warning or merit on their part to be His confidants. Soon, they were sure, He would be acclaimed by the Jews as their expected Messiah, the Saviour they had so long and impatiently expected.

The past weeks had been utterly charming. He had been their magnetic and convincing Teacher, putting them through the novitiate of principle and practice. Their eyes had popped at His miracles. Their ears had tingled at His words. They had swelled at the admiration showered upon Him by the people and the envy they read in the glances of young men whom He had passed by in His choosing.

Often enough He had puzzled them. He seemed to yearn for a world that stretched quite beyond the boundaries of their close little self-satisfied nation. He did distressing things . . . as when He ran away from cities that demanded that there and now He become their King.

But even such bewilderments disturbed them only in passing. For quite clearly on one near day He would accept the kingship, not of any single city, but of all Israel. Perhaps that kingdom would stretch out unto the empire of earth. Then they, the lucky fellows, could be His cabinet ministers, His counselors of state, His viceroys riding in regal splendor into far-off provinces.

So they laughed easily and often as they hugged to their secret hearts their great good fortune. A

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few months ago they had been struggling fishermen who with leaky boats and hand-me-down nets had dredged a wretched living out of poorly stocked inland seas.

What could possibly explain their luck?

True they were of God's chosen people.

Back of them unrolled less a personal history of their ancestors than the almost incredible story of God's goodness to a stiff-necked, grumbling, grasping people. They were Jews, conscious and proud of their racial strain. For them God had done far beyond what He had done for the rest of Adam's sons.

They had been selected to know the one true God and to worship Him as He wished to be worshiped in the Temple He Himself had designed.

They had walked under God's cloud of protection, His pillar of fire lighting their nights, His pillar of smoke tempering the midday sun rays of their lives.

To their safekeeping had been entrusted God's Law. They had been commissioned to carry within them the seed from which would spring the world's Saviour.

In all this they had been fortunate, and they knew themselves to be important.

But wherein had they merited personally?

They personally mattered little enough to Judea and not at all to Rome.

Born of obscure parents, they plied a wretched

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trade and moved through monotony toward graves that would bear no markers. Utterly undramatic existences, without adventures, the high-lighting of hope, or the climaxing of achievement.

Then suddenly their lives had been incredibly changed. Personally, as individuals, they had become significant, probably — in the reckoning of later history — great.

The eyes of their nation were upon them. They were envied by people who had many times their money or brains. Important men in Jerusalem had heard their names and taken note of them.

For the Miracle-Worker had inexplicably selected them as the custodians of His secrets, the sharers and shapers of His plans.

This compelling Teacher, who held spellbound the restless multitudes gaping openmouthed as He talked to them from the Mount, had invited them who were for the most part as yet uneducated, to join His faculty and, after some special training that He had already started to give them, to teach as He taught and capture as He did the rapt eagerness of a listening public.

Now the disciples of this Master, in time they too would be masters.

His lessons were still difficult enough . . . but once they heard Him explain more fully His absorbing but sometimes obscure short stories, they too would startle and compel the waiting world.

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All this was surface and clear to all of them.

Deep within them was a joy they had not as yet troubled to analyze.

Sometimes they forgot their personal exaltation in sharp amazement at the splendor of His character and the glory of His virtues.

For the first time they were seeing before them the vision of the perfect life. They lived in constant association with mankind's one perfect Man. They were daily touching virtue, and it went forth from Him to infect them with goodness. They watched Him and saw how prayer should be prayed and kindness lived and love turned into deeds of practical charity. They witnessed miracles that confirmed the truth of what He said and the love that expanded His whole attitude toward His fellows. They heard words of forgiveness that made sin seem more frightful and the mercy of God more gracious.

So they were walking, that spring day, in the sunshine of His glorious personality.

They had caught an insight into His impelling secrets. Their eyes had been lighted with the kindling beauty of the truth He taught and the rules for happiness that He preached and so persuasively practiced.

Dramatically He had begun to give them His own powers. And He had promised that far more was to follow.

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But even now He was beginning little by little to give them, without divesting Himself, these precious powers of His that made happy everyone whom they touched.

He commanded them to teach truth in His name. He had indicated that He would give them the authority to lift from men's crushed shoulders the stinking burden of sin.

He even ordered them to work miracles in His name.

They had watched Him change water into wine and bounteously feed a multitude with a few loaves and a basket of fish. He had prophesied that He would give meaning and permanence to these miracles by some wonder that would change the wine into His precious blood and the bread into His flesh for the life of the world.

So on that spring day they moved swiftly down the highway on the heels of their Master, the Messiah and their future King.

They had the strength that came from months of association with history's most glamorous Personality. They were moving toward the strength-giving wonder of their first Communion.

Had they really understood all that lay before them and around them, they would have known that they were happy largely for the wrong reasons. They were gay rather than really happy, ambitious rather than serene, delighted with themselves in-

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stead of eager to know what He expected of them, what He would have to demand of these men He was schooling so carefully for a mission so tough and straining.

Yes they were happy — but for such flimsy and trivial reasons.

Judas was gloating over the fact that he had wangled for himself the post of treasurer. He had been placed in charge of the money of their company. And though right now the purse was very flat, he was confident that the day would come when he would handle, not a purse, but a treasury. His fingers already itched to dip into the taxes that would flow into the King's exchequer. Let Peter have the keys of the kingdom of heaven; he, Judas, had the keys to a treasury on earth.

Already, though, Judas had begun to sour slightly.

The purse had been empty too long. This Wonder-Worker had a way of wasting His miracles on people who were totally without means to make adequate payment. Jesus paid taxes instead of collecting them. And on several occasions, occasions now growing annoyingly frequent, He had said ridiculous things in praise of poverty and expressed a mad interest in and admiration for the poor.

Peter walked very close to his Master, taking the place that he felt was his by right. After all he was in the King's projected plans, destined to be His closest adviser.

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He found that he still glowed with pride when he recalled how the Lord had solemnly changed his name. Simon, he had been called by his parents; Jesus had changed even that. Now he was called Peter, the rock, the very firm rock indeed, the foundation stone on which the Master Builder planned to erect His world-wide organization.

Peter found it difficult not to look upon the others with some condescension. His sense of priority was keen and vivid. Should trial and struggle strike their Master, it might well be expected that the others would tremble and show the white feather. He, Peter, was the rock against which hell itself would beat in vain.

The youthful John was full of merriment, for his heart was brimful of love.

Already he had become known in their company as the "beloved disciple," the disciple whom Jesus loved. For him the Master had an obvious tenderness.

Like all young people John was in love with love.

He was sure that he understood love — a sweet thing, a gentle, warm, summery thing.

He would have been startled and shocked to hear that love was fierce and demanding, tough as a martyr's death and unemotional as the devotion of a mother ministering to a distressingly sick child.

John had not dreamed of the demands of love, its imperious commands to do hard and difficult

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things, to beat one's rebellious nature into submission, even to take one's heart and reshape it to the pattern of a heart thorn-crowned and shot through with burning flames.

As for the other Apostles, they strode down that sunny road, smiling and satisfied, deeply happy, regarding the future with a buoyant confidence. Around them was a bright, summery haze. Nothing was too clear . . . but everything was simply wonderful. Nothing was very definite . . . except that everything was just as it should be.

They moved amid the admiration of their fellow countrymen.

They were on the very verge of realizing ambitions that they, like the rest of the Jews, so wretchedly misunderstood.

Whither the road He was leading them eventually came out, they did not know and did not bother to ask. Ultimately it was a road to power. Someday it would find them riding over their prostrate enemies.

It might well be that battles must be fought; but that bothered them not the least. For these were battles already won by the irresistible genius of the King and their own undoubted bravery and skill. Rome would fall and Israel triumph. And somewhere on the near horizon were thrones so real seeming and well defined that they could find time to squabble over which would be theirs and

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which would be assigned to their fellow Apostles.

The first dramatic test, the rehearsal for the Passion, came in a setting very different from this sunlit road.

No longer walked ahead of them a triumphant Master.

Instead they followed a lonely Man through the dark of night into a deep repellent garden. Everything had changed within a matter of days.

Five days or less before, they were the most important figures around a King riding the beast reserved for royalty over waving palms and the scattered garments of men and women calling Him their Saviour and challenging Him to take over the kingdom and be their ruler.

What then had happened?

Almost a matter of hours after this ovation they were stumbling into the sinister shadows of an unsavory garden. Olive trees flung out upon the bare earth the skeletal pattern formed by their twisting branches. A pale moon shone upon them, not warm and silvery, but forbidding and ghost-like; it seemed leagued with the plotters, wherever they might be, and furnishing them with the brightest possible light for whatever search their enemies might initiate.

They moved through the alternation of too bright moonlight and too oppressive shadow, certain that every bush concealed spies and that every stirring

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of leaves was threat of armed guards who waited in ambush.

Gethsemani, scene of successful plots and setting for the collapse of Christ's chosen followers, proved perfect stage-set for conspiracy's triumph and the cowardly flight of His friends.

Too well does history record and remember the pitiful little farce played by the Apostles against that midnight setting. It was a tragedy of treason, with strong overtones of bathos and buffoonery.

First from the bushes crept, not a dreaded enemy agent against whom Christ could raise a miraculously repelling hand, but one of the Twelve against whom the loving Christ seemed powerless. The Apostle's lips were twisted in a kiss that branded his Master's cheek with his villainy. Even the other Apostles could not appreciate the depths of what was happening. It was almost with relief that they watched Judas come. As they heard the sound of his kiss, they sighed in relief. It never dawned upon them that this was the agreed signal of treason, betrayal, and death.

When the hidden guards do appear, Peter, the rock of courage and the boastful protector of his Master, swings with a sword and cuts off the ear of a minor servant.

Then there is a mad scramble as the Apostles, by their own admission world conquerors, leave their King bound and in the hands of His enemies.

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We listen vainly for gallant speech . . . for someone to make the scene ring with challenge or defense or a great heroic cry for help.

We do hear a speech . . . but quite different from what any dramatist would have written, a speech spoken in the whimpering voice of the frightened chief of the Apostles. A woman has tossed him his cue; it is his chance to speak high heroism. He picks up the cue . . . and fairly blubbers, "I neither know nor understand what thou sayest. . . . I know not this Man of whom you speak."

Shall we laugh, we who sit in the audience? Or shall we cry?

We hear Peter go melodramatic.

Now his voice rises in a frenzy of fear and a storm of protest. Oaths splatter against the courtyard flagging. For Peter, cursing and swearing that he does not know the Man, is calling upon heaven and hell to witness that the Captive is to him a total stranger, that he and the Man have never so much as passed the time of day together.

Then silence . . . and the appalled wonder of an audience that cannot believe its ears.

The plot has gone all awry. The actors have not merely forgotten their lines; they have totally destroyed the sense of the words.

What roles the Apostles played in the tragedy!

Dramatists have with relish held up to our scorn cowards in their dramas.

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Audiences find cowards upon the stage the stuff of mockery. They hate them only less than they despise them.

Perhaps that is because in every coward we see a side of ourselves that we long to conceal. We hate and fear the cowardice that lurks within us. We violently hiss in others the thing that we fear and hate in ourselves.

As the climax of Christ's tragedy closes in about Him, His agonizing eyes sweep the crowd, searching, searching. Where are the men to whom He had given years of intimacy? They had been close beside Him during the triumphant procession of Palm Sunday. . . . They had been nowhere in sight during the dolorous way of the cross. He had taken three of them up the hill of the Transfiguration. . . . Only one of that lucky trio had dared climb the hill of His death.

Peter, the rock, is pulverized to quicksand.

Judas, the treasurer, has for thirty pieces of silver flung away the treasure of divine grace.

James, the son of thunder, is hushed, silent, trembling in a dark corner.

The rest are momentarily safe behind locked doors, their hopes in rubble about their heads, their ears alert to every footfall that may mean that the plotters had flung their dragnet out beyond the chief Victim to mesh the small fry that had only briefly escaped.

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Upon the scene of the tragedy there was only one Apostle, the young John. He alone was not in full flight from fear and the sight of their King upon His bloody throne.

We who watch the scene have deep inside us a bitter contempt for the lot of them.

How could the Apostles have been so stupid?

How could they have gone so blind to their own interests and run away from the Man who had constantly turned defeat into victory and had used the very power of His enemies as new proof of His power and glory?

They should have guessed that in the end Jesus would conquer.

However black the afternoon of Good Friday and however deep in silent despair the night that followed, surely there was a new dawn just ahead. He had promised no less than that. They could hardly have forgotten so soon.

History taught them that Lucifer always had his brief hour of triumph. It was as if God had held back, reluctant to strike His once beautiful and still powerful angel. But soon or late God did strike at last, and Satan and his army fell like lightning from the sky or scuttled down the sharp incline of history's hill back to the waiting dungeons of hell.

It seems that we have to believe that three years of wisdom and miracles, of power over winds and demons, of the shackling of the Devil and the

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mastery of death could have been canceled out in a matter of minutes.

Yet such was to all seeming the case.

So we regard the Apostles with contempt. Safe in the cushioned seats of history's theater, we despise them for cowards and look upon them with the loathing we reserve for people who act as we ourselves well might have acted in the same case.

Would we in their place have done the scene much differently?

Have we, when the scene in the drama of our own lives was much like that, done a highly creditable job?

We despise the Apostles. Theirs was the voice offstage, the cowardly whimper from the wings.

Theirs was the chance to speak thrilling lines . . . and they allowed themselves a stage fright that paralyzed their vocal cords and kept them hiding in the safe darkness of the dressing rooms.

And all the while I wonder by what right I despise them or feel so sure — as Peter once was sure — that, given the part, we would play it heroically.

Our rehearsals for the role in our own lives are not too convincing.

We too are of the chosen race, born by baptism into the faith, brought by God's favor into the close union with the Mystical Body of the Saviour.

We, like the Apostles, come fresh from Holy Communion.

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We have had, truth to tell, more training even than the Apostles. The Church, speaking with the infallible voice of Christ, has taught us all through our lives. We have known the Sacred Heart of the Redeemer in the greatness and tenderness of Catholic devotions.

We have long stood on the rock-firm foundation of Christ's truth, truth so sane and consistent and reasonable and calm and reassuring in the confusion of a crazed and tortured world.

We have recurrently held the Saviour in private interview and known the strength of His presence in the Communion of His love.

Yet we have loved money or its visible equivalents, even as Judas did.

We have sinned with Peter — denying that we ever knew or followed the Saviour — as the voice of a woman rang in our ears . . . or the taunt of a man stung us.

Untempted, we have been loud in our boasting: Let all others desert Him; we will stand firm. But our lines were different when we were slapped with a sneer or taunted with a loudly shouted doubt or mocked by a skeptic whose clothes were better and whose arguments were more glib than our own.

We were most ready to walk with Christ in Palm Sunday's triumph . . . but the *via crucis* was too terrible for our faltering feet. We loved His sweetness . . . and fled the scandal of His being re-

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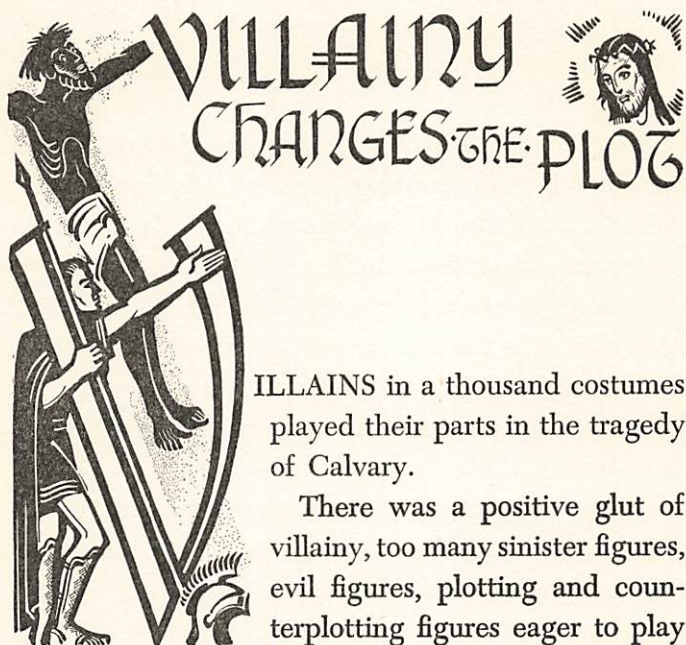
jected. We accepted His miracles . . . but we dreaded His greatest miracle, the miracle by which He died at the hands of sin for the claims of love.

"Father, forgive them," the Saviour cried, and, looking at the retreating backs of His fair-weather friends, He spoke a generous apology: ". . . for they know not what they do."

The apology can scarcely hold for an educated Catholic. We have seen too much of the Saviour to be excused if we cling to Him avidly in His hours of happiness and fly from Him in our temptation and in His bitter trial.

Too often have we entered the scenes of Christ's tragedy wearing the costumes of Judas and Peter, of the ever doubting Thomas, of James, Matthew, and the rest.

Have we the right to ask leave to play just once and very close to the cross the beautiful part of the beloved and in the end faithful and devoted John?



ILLAINS in a thousand costumes played their parts in the tragedy of Calvary.

There was a positive glut of villainy, too many sinister figures, evil figures, plotting and counterplotting figures eager to play antagonists to the Hero of the piece.

But among them all two stand out surprisingly.

They were far from the worst of the lot. But they were the most completely dramatic, the most surprising of all.

Seldom in dramatic history had any other villain worn the classic robes of villainy so convincingly as did the two thieves who hung one on either side of the crucified King.

Our attention ultimately focuses upon the one to the right; he catches the spotlight and holds it convincingly.

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But for a time both thieves are much alike — thieves of a long and not too successful tradition, men of violence in life finding violence in death.

They had lived out of the pockets and purses and gutted houses of their fellow citizens. They had probably never turned an honest penny in all their busy days.

Beyond that, the chances are decidedly that they were murderers. A thief cannot ply his trade long before he must make the quick decision between money or a life; and since life is cheap and money is important, he is not likely to hesitate. When life stands in the way of professional duties, naturally enough professional duties prevail.

No casual chance, no mistake in casting had placed the two thieves to the right and the left of the Hero of the drama. The priests and the governor had set the stage with a magnificent sense of tragic irony.

The Hero had claimed to be a King. Let Him make His final exit attended by a retinue exactly suited to His type of kingship.

Since it was with great difficulty that He had been convicted of fabricated crimes by witnesses who had not seen Him do things He had not so much as considered doing, the execution might lack verisimilitude without some convincing touch. The circumstances of the killing could rid the sentence of some of its judicial smell. Let Him be lumped with criminals about whose guilt there could be

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no slightest doubt, and He would be damned by sheer association.

It was no difficult task to pick out two men of blood, greedy fellows who had preyed upon the ordinary citizens. And in their company history and the audience about the cross would hardly distinguish the Hero from the villains. They would all fall under the same sentence. They would all be regarded as equally guilty. Their proved malice would sweep along the questionably guilty Man, and those who ran would hardly pause to read the fine print of injustice and scandalous miscarriage of law that could tell the trial's real story.

So the two thieves were selected for the dubious honor of dying as courtiers to the discredited King, and by their death they could smear Him with their own patent guilt.

The parts were perfectly cast.

Out of the casting book the pair were notably foul and ugly.

There they hung, the ultimate resultant of sin, the end product of vicious living. Their deaths measured up to the standard of their living. For long years they had stupidly rejected the happiness God begs His children to accept, and now they knew the supreme human unhappiness of public execution — with eternal ruin just ahead.

Long breakers of the law, they were now broken by the law. Throughout a life of crime they had

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soaked up villainy that now in the sweat of death poured from them as a repellent miasma.

The audience knew quite well the lines it might expect from the two thieves. What they had to say would be in keeping with their characters. Villains, they would shout villainous words. The evil in their faces and their records called for curses and blasphemies and cynical, disillusioned hate.

One of the thieves lived up to the tradition of his role. He played to the final curtain the part he had long rehearsed in his living.

That the Hero dying between the two thieves was clearly not one of a rival band, certainly strange to their company, made no slightest impression upon this one thief. There was a faint chance that at the very end the Miracle-Worker would work one final miracle that would include Himself and His disreputable associates. But the way to make sure of such a miracle was, not by gentle request or prayerful suggestion, but with taunts and vile accusations, by daring the Fellow to pull a trick, by arousing His resentment at the sentence.

So the thief on His left cried aloud the blasphemy that was his normal speech.

He had hated all through his life; he preferred to go to death still hating. About his villainous form the costume of evil was caked and hardened. He could not break through. Indeed he did not want to break through.

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The other thief was in external appearance partner and twin to the first.

His costume was in the same classic cut.

His spoken lines had for a lifetime been identical with those of the other thief.

Yet while the other ranted and raved, taunting and cursing and leading the mobsters in his fiery resentment, this thief — Dismas, tradition calls him — felt a strange stirring, a complete discontent with the role he had been set to play.

The ugliness of sin was something he had known familiarly all his life. Crime had calloused his hands and crusted his heart and taken off the edge of his mind and frozen his soul. He was a criminal by habit and profession. Sin had no secrets from him, no noisome arcana yet to be divulged.

Perhaps at that hour so close to death the final rush of memory surged over him. Human belief seems to think that a man facing death is likely in an instantaneous panorama to see the whole of his past life.

If that was what happened to Dismas, it well may be that he was whirled back on the wings of memory to the desert from which popular tradition says his tribe took its rise . . . and to other things of which tradition speaks. . . .

There he had probably learned his trade under a robber father who earned an uneasy livelihood from the caravans that ventured within reach of superior forces.

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He may in that memory have heard once more his mother telling, as peasant women do, the constantly repeated story of Christ's infancy: the man and the woman who had come out of the desert twilight, breathless from flight, the sounds of Herod's soldiers still spurring them on . . . the woman carrying in her arms an amazingly beautiful Baby, the fairer because the little son of the robber's wife was at that time ill to the point of death.

Dismas may have recalled how his mother bragged that she had played hostess to the refugees and in a supreme act of desert hospitality had poured into a basin the precious water that she then kept for her own infant's bath.

The repeated climax of the endlessly interesting story was perhaps clear in his now otherwise dulled brain. "You were a sick little fellow," she had told him, over and over again. "And that night I feared you would go with the desert breeze and I should face the dawn carrying you dead against my breast. But after she, the other woman, had washed her Baby in the water, I washed you, my son. . . ."

"You were generous to share the precious drops of water," one of the listeners always told her, complimenting her. "She only did what was right when she repaid you."

"But what repayment!" his mother had always cried. "So I placed you, my baby," she would continue, "in the same water. And lol the wonder. You were so sick and weak, you puny little fellow

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who are now my great, strong son. But as the water touched your flesh, behold! your flesh turned a healthy pink. And as it flowed over your limbs, the little knotted stick legs straightened and grew strong. Your wizened hands, that had no power even to clutch as other babies do, unfolded like the petals of a desert bloom. And you were well . . . well, my son, and on the road to vigorous manhood.

"Thus she repaid me, did this wondrous woman. For you became the healthiest of our tribe, worthy son of your great father, destined chieftain of our robber band."

How much of it was true?

Miracles are easy in infancy, he had often said, laughing. Later on a man sweated and schemed for what he won.

Yet of this Man it had been said that He too worked miracles.

Could one who had begun life with a miracle hope at the very end to snatch a miracle from what God there was?

The thief Dismas painfully swung his eyes toward the Man in the center.

Dismas had been twisted by evil into the ugly thing that now hung upon the cross. But if he knew evil, he also recognized good. If his eyes had long been accustomed to the effects of crime, they were not slow to see the effects of extraordinary virtue.

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And this Man was utterly different from the robbers he had known and the despicable victims of the robbers who had whined for their lost gold and wheedled the robbers with lying promises in order to save some portion of their worthless trinkets. If he himself was evil in the flesh, surely this Man was good incarnate.

A last raucous blasphemy of his companion thief served as a cue line for Dismas.

"Let Him alone," he thundered at his fellow. "We've got, the pair of us, what's coming to us. But this Man is different. He's done no wrong. Keep your tongue between your teeth, and let the guiltless die in peace."

An amazed silence fell over the scene.

The crowd was hushed. Their surprise choked their taunts in their throats.

But Dismas' greatest line had yet to be spoken. Death was already rattling in his throat. Hope had come late into a hopeless life. Light was flaming late in an existence passed in the darkness of caves and the pitch black of midnight crimes.

But out of hope reborn and the sight of virtue dying innocently in the midst of guilt, he spoke man's greatest speech of confidence, sin's triumphant tribute to virtue, the cry of an evil man sick of his evil to the good Man with goodness enough to spare and share:

"Lord, remember me."

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There was another villain, spectacular in costume, classic in tradition, standing near the cross.

If the thief had been villainy in filth and grime, this other was villainy well mannered, educated, robed in fine silk and the latest in hand-tooled armor.

Longinus, the captain of the guard, had served a lifetime in the Roman army. His term had been sufficiently protracted to give him an intimate working knowledge of sin in most of its effects. He had marched with sin at the head of his company of pagan fighting men. He had given the order that fired towns and pillaged unarmed villages. Like the seasoned officer he was, he had moved, a disciplined automaton, where orders took him — to sacks and guttings, to the decimation of a tribe, to the putting of an entire people to the sword. His own short sword had slit many a throat, and his lance fell easily to the exact level at which could be found an enemy's heart.

War is always terrible.

War in those pagan days was terrible beyond our imagining. When two men met sword to sword, one of them was bound to fall, and the other might drag himself away mortally wounded.

To the victors belonged the spoils, the loot of captured villages, the men, women, and children who could be chained together for delivery to the nearest slave markets. Rape was the consequent camp follower of battle; the conquered men died,

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and the women wept as the cynical victor beat down the doors.

Longinus, the captain of the guard, had stood indifferently watching the tragedy of Calvary. It was routine with him, an execution that hardly broke the monotony of a soldier's day.

Who can tell what made the swift change in his attitude? Whatever happened, he suddenly saw the Hero of the piece for the Hero He indeed was. In that same flash of reason or grace that revealed the divinity of the crucified Victim, Longinus saw himself for the villain he had too long been.

With much too much fidelity and for much too long a time he had served blindly a cynically cruel Caesar. Along with a thousand other officers he had obediently lifted his arm in salute to an emperor who pretended to be a god. But the arm that now shot forward in salute to the Man upon the cross moved by no disciplined impulse. It was a spontaneous gesture of reverence. It was a soldier's greeting to more than a king — to a King who was in very truth the Son of God.

The splendor of this King's dying called for a convincing speech.

That speech was the surprising assignment of a pagan warrior. His bow to the great king in Rome had often been disciplined mockery.

His contempt for the petty kings to whom he had been messenger was open but veiled in politeness.

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His greeting to the King in captivity on His cross, the Son of God dying rejected by the people who had so long awaited their King, was spontaneous, heartfelt, and magnificently sincere.

“Indeed this was the Son of God.”

So upon the stage of Calvary stood the two surprise characters.

A moment before they had seemed to be cast as villains. Now a sudden bright spotlight of courage lighted their action.

Their thrilling lines were so startling, so utterly without place in the plot written by the conspirators that they were greeted by an echoing silence.

Here was dramatic surprise at its best — the thief and the captain suddenly, abruptly, almost as if without premeditation throwing off their villain costumes . . . their voices taking on a new tone . . . their faces growing magnificently strong . . . their gestures wide, sweeping, filled with conviction.

The thief whom tradition calls Dismas suddenly revealed himself as a man of boundless hope.

The captain, whose heart had seemed cold and impenetrable as the shining armor of his uniform, abruptly shows himself as a man of courageous faith.

Each flings aside the costume he has worn too long. All their lives they have been villains in the drama. Yet their association with the horrors of vice and the consequences of sin have disgusted them with the villainous roles they have played.

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The thief whom all history will know by the rarely given title Good drops his role of robber and murderer, and, turning to the Man who is virtue in the flesh — as he, Dismas, had long been sin incarnate — he speaks that magnificently eloquent line of exalted hope.

“Lord,” his powerful voice shouts across the theater of history, “Lord, remember me when Thou shalt come into Thy kingdom.”

The priests fall back a startled step.

At first they can hardly believe their ears. Has their sardonic trick backfired? Has the King to whom they had assigned the least likely or acceptable of courtiers actually found a courtier in one of them? The fellow had dared call this rejected Man his Lord. They, the priests, had stripped the King of every slightest sign of royalty, yet the thief had known that the road of the cross was actually the road leading straight into His kingdom.

The priests had assigned a thief a place in the royal entourage as a mark of bitter mockery, and he had turned the tables. He had accepted in all earnestness the place assigned him. Forced into the farce of attendance upon rejected majesty, he had abruptly changed the farce into brave reality.

His hand was already outstretched in a royal gesture of salute.

His head was proudly lifted in clear recognition of royalty.

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So it was that the drama got a new and totally unexpected turn. The King had found a courtier to walk before Him into His courts. Seeing the complete distortion of their brilliant plans, the plotters fell back from the cross in blinding rage. The hope of a dying thief had slapped down the contemptuous despair of God's own anointed priests; the voice of Dismas, still sodden with repented evil, rings out in the words of inspiring truth.

In a bitter scene of comedy relief the soldiers had shot dice for the few earthly possessions of the Poor Man of Nazareth. The stake of their elaborate game was the travel-stained cloak of a man who was known to be penniless.

The captain watched this byplay to the finish and then turned to concentrate upon the Man whose clothes were being contemptuously bundled by the winning dicer. The captain's eye ran along the strong but now pale and almost bloodless form and then suddenly came to halt at the sentence of execution that had been nailed on the cross above the Victim's head.

For the first time he noticed that it was a flat statement as of a well-known fact: "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews."

Up to that moment Longinus had probably given the whole nasty affair hardly a second thought. He had the impersonal objectivity of a professional soldier. He knew that his place was to guard an exe-

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cuted man and to hold back a mob that might try to add infamy to death.

Now in the lull before death he had time to observe and think . . . and the legend startled him. Rome was slow to make statements that were merely ironic; these words stated a fact; the official placard called the Man a King.

Into the barracks had probably drifted rumors of the miracles that Jesus had wrought out of gentleness and in manifestation of His incredible powers. As a polite pagan and an officer who was deaf to rumors, Longinus would probably have heard without hearing. It took the sight of the Man, the startling background of preternatural storm, the insane and senseless anger of the mob, and the tribute of an official placard to startle the captain into attention.

Midway between the murdered and the murderers stands the disciplined, keen-minded Roman officer. Brief and ugly has been his association with the Man on the Cross. Yet he could not fail to note that this Man's words were imperial in their dignity, His forgiveness magnanimous to the point of miracle; in the egocentric moment of death He was concerned with others and forgetful of self.

When a thief nailed near Him had spoken of His entrance into a kingdom, He had not answered with a bitter laugh. He had not out of humiliation and despair cried out, "Fine chance I've got of a kingdom now." He had answered with an amazing confidence,

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calmly guaranteeing paradise, promising it that very day.

Here was a most unlikely situation.

Nailed to a cross and powerless to move, deserted by the miserable handful of fishermen He had vainly tried to train, stripped except for the mocking royalty of a crown of thorns, a robe of blood, and a throne of a cross, He had still accepted the royal salute from the thief. Doubt had not even tinged His voice. No hesitation had marked His manner when He had solemnly answered: "Amen I say to thee, this day thou shalt be with Me in paradise."

Was this the most blatant arrogance?

Was the Man on the cross a preposterous pretender?

The placard proclaimed Him a King . . . and He, within a matter of minutes away from death, talked in utter confidence about His kingdom.

Again the centurion's eye swept upward to the official title.

Out of all the titles that might have been chosen — blasphemer, deceiver of the people, rebel against Rome, disturber of the peace — the property man had chosen that particular title. Surely there was more than ironic chance here.

Could it be that the property man had chosen precisely the correct title?

If anything, Longinus had had too much experience with kings.

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He had served his term of duty in the court of Caesar and probably on closer sight of the emperor had wondered a little why he risked his life for that greedy little egocentric.

Undoubtedly he had brushed against the petty kings who came scampering to Rome to secure their tolerated place in the pattern of the growing Roman Empire. He had watched them bow and scrape to Caesar's throne; he had heard of their nights in the freedom of Roman taverns; his proud lips curled as he watched them kiss Caesar's sandal or beg for the privilege of loosing the slipper of a dancing girl.

He had probably stood guard during the executions by which royalty was accustomed to rid itself of distasteful enemies. No doubt he had known kings who called themselves gods and pretended gods who behaved like drunken swine.

In his years of soldiering he had very likely accepted often the surrender of princelings who came out of conquered villages and from smashed tribes to grovel for their lives . . . at the price even of slavery.

Kings had never impressed the captain of the guard.

But now . . .

He looked questioningly at the King who had been allotted a slave's death, a Monarch with no kingdom but the hill of death, no tribute but the last insults of a sordid mob.

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What could the centurion possibly think of Jesus?

Clearly the Man was executed because He refused to beg Caesar for His throne. The people whose reputed King He was had tossed Him over to the Romans — to death.

Yet on the cross He was in kingly fashion showering the largess of forgiveness and signing letters patent that made of a thief a nobleman.

The chin strap of Longinus tightened as he set his jaw in a line of determination.

If a thief had spoken a line of vaulting hope, he could speak a line of brave faith.

With a sharply commanding gesture he dropped his costume of cynicism, tossed aside that impersonal uniform of cruelty that marked the professional soldier. His hand shot forward in the gesture of salute reserved for the emperor. His chin lifted in proud acceptance of royal claims as the dull scarlet light of the angry sun glinted from his helmet.

He had caught his cue, and the magnificent response sprang to his lips.

"Indeed," he cried, in a voice that has resounded timelessly through the theater of history, "this Man was the Son of God."

Dismas the thief and Longinus the centurion bring into the drama the twin elements of surprise and a courage that would awake a burst of quick applause.

Out from the ranks of villainy suddenly appear two minor heroes.

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The thief has turned to goodness.

The pagan has become a believer.

The plot so carefully developed by priestly cleverness is completely upset.

The audience gasps in delighted surprise.

That low ripple of applause began to rise above the sound of the thunder as the spectators — and as all spectators all through history who would watch and listen — caught the significance of the scene.

Here was inspiring courage.

Here was a challenge to all men.

The thief had found hope when hope seemed dying.

The pagan officer had found in the dying Man upon the gibbet the divine Lord of life.

The list of villains in the drama of Calvary is long.

Our names, I am afraid, are listed among those who played the villain roles most successfully.

Yet there is small excuse for us to hold to that self-chosen part.

We have seen the consequences of sin — the ruin of lives and the wreck of the world.

We have watched the almost melodramatic things that evil has done to the world's greatest Hero. But then we have known the thousand minor tragedies, the scripts for which have been written in blood and tears, in the downfall of nations, the systematic destruction of men and women, God's best visible creation.

HIS PASSION FOREVER

Knowing sin, we are stupid indeed who persistently play the villain's part.

Fortunately the inspiring lines spoken by thief and centurion can be ours.

Their magnificent gestures are easily imitable.

So picking up my cue from the thief, I too turn my eyes to the hope of the world and cry out to Christ, the rejected, that prayer of all those who at the moment of death dread the final rejection of death in sin.

"Lord, remember me!"

Proudly and with splendid faith I lift my hand in royal salute as, standing now costumed like the centurion who found his God in the Man he had thoughtlessly slain, I cry, "Indeed, this Man was the Son of God."



ENTER: THE HEROINE

DRAMA without a heroine is almost unthinkable.

Perhaps that could be more accurately stated thus: A play without women characters is as rare as human life without a woman's influence.

Women have played full part in the tragedy and comedy of human existence. They have moved the action forward to a happy curtain. They have plunged the hero downward to ruin and death — or at least have been costarred with him in his final catastrophe.

Into the story of man, woman from the very beginning has written her own significant part. God's first plot had assigned to the first actresses gracious roles — fine mothers of the human race, brave wives of God's brave sons, daughters who were to bring laughter and happiness to their parents, sweethearts whose innocence was to be fine inspiration for man's upward striving.

HIS PASSION FOREVER

But consistently women have found the role of adventuress strangely fascinating.

It was shortly after the rise of the first curtain that poor Eve switched parts and set herself to play adventuress. Thereupon she set a pattern and established a fashion that has been followed by a million women in the sad plots of human tragedy.

Poor Eve!

She risked all and lost all.

She lifted her hand for a worthless fruit and dragged down upon herself the tree of life.

She sighed to be like God and suddenly found herself impaled on the twin horns of good and evil.

Poor Eve!

With reckless hand she sprang the lid of Pandora's box and let loose upon the world the swarming insects that sting and poison, gnaw into the fibers of human structure, and carry the germs of disease and decay.

Poor Eve!

Who could have told her that her role for all time to come was to be dramatic coach to the villainesses who would improve upon her lamentable example and worsen her stupid lines and augment with new ingenuity her silly, sinful gesture?

Men are responsible for too, too much of the world's tragedy.

But often enough the tragedy of men has been the women in their lives.

ENTER THE HEROINE

Women with hands formed for mercy have thrust the knife of murder into the hands of uncouth Macbeths. Mothers of the race have stifled life, and wives have torn down our homes. Sweethearts have poisoned hearts. Some of the most innocent-seeming smiles have been invitations to sin.

The costume of innocence that God had fashioned for women has too often seemed dull and colorless to them. They have dipped it in scarlet and trimmed it with meretricious metal. They have slit it and cut it with strident immodesty.

To the happiness of our race the good women in the world drama have been many. Yet the men critics who have written the record have seemed to find good women unexciting. They have preferred to dramatize the villainesses whose loves were lust, whose gestures were incitement to sin, and whose scenes were played against backgrounds of searing passions and burning cities.

Now upon the stage of Calvary walks a woman. This time the woman is a glorious heroine.

She is a daughter of Eve, but she is playing the woman as God would have that lovely part played.

Yet from the instant of her entrance it is almost difficult to recognize her as the heroine of the drama — unless it be that her part as the woman of sorrows so perfectly matches the role of Christ, the Man of Sorrows.

She is pale, tortured, sick at heart.

HIS PASSION FOREVER

Last night she did not sleep. Her Son had been captured in the garden and clapped into the dungeons beneath the palace of the high priests. Though the walls deadened the swish of the scourges and the cellars held too deep for sight the hideous crowning with thorns, nothing could hide His Passion from His Mother, whose heart had since His infancy beat in perfect rhythm with His.

When He was dragged from court to court, she followed as closely as the leveled lances of sentries permitted. She could hear the lies that were offered as serious testimony. She could catch the rising anger of the accusers, reduced to substituting wrath and fury for proofs that they could not produce.

Perhaps Peter found her during the early hours of the morning and poured out to her in the floods of his agonized tears the story of what had happened under the paschal moon. All her clear knowledge of the prophecies now rose to tell her what was going on and what must still be done before the dropping of the final curtain.

She had hurried after Him to Herod's court, but purity was barred at the door of that libertine.

She had been in the crowd when Pilate brought Him forth for the final choice of the people. Barabbas was sufficiently ill-famed to be known to her, and her nerves must have quivered in sympathetic tension as His people shouted for the murderer and clamored for the death of Mercy Incarnate.

ENTER THE HEROINE

Now as the Hero is lifted against the backdrop of stormy skies, she forces her way through the crowd and stands silent, motionless, dry eyed, beyond the possibility of tears, beyond the solace of words.

Her once queenly beauty is dim, wan, battered.

Her skirts have soaked up the mud along the way of the cross. And since the mob outran her in its eagerness to catch every overtone of pain and every possible cry of the anguished victim, she had been forced almost to fight her way into the open space kept by the Roman sentries around the cross.

Now she stands on the very edge of that deep, passionate ring of spectators who hedge with vicious ugliness the tree of the cross.

Her modest veil has been torn by clutching fingers that struggled to hold her back. Her cloak is in disarray. The dirt of the highways is on her skirts, and salt sweat has traced pathways down her drawn cheeks.

Only the resistless pressure of mother love has forced her to the edge of the crowd. So tightly massed had been the mob that it had taken long anguished minutes for her to break through. But each time an impulse of shame or a spasm of fear had driven the spectators a little farther back and huddled them a little more closely together, she had been able to press a little closer to her Son upon the cross.

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Great actors and actresses act almost chiefly with their eyes. Eloquent eyes, we call them . . . flashing eyes . . . eyes that burn with dramatically summoned tears . . . eyes that seem to gloat in factitious hatred or melt with simulated grief.

Now the eyes of Mary are terrifyingly eloquent.

She lifts them to drink in her Son hanging just out of her reach, the God of His people whom His people have repudiated, the Hero who is going down to apparently total defeat, the King who has found the only throne that His subjects will permit Him.

Every wound finds through her eyes entrance into the inner core of her soul. His every twitch of pain writes itself indelibly upon the retina of her heart.

She watches His lips as they twist in silent pain, and in involuntary imitation her lips twist too.

Her hands, which would so eagerly minister to her dying Son's last needs, drop to her sides in futile emptiness.

If from the beauty of her face Christ, loveliest of the sons of men, had borrowed His human features, now her face is the mobile mirror that catches and reflects and reduplicates the agony of her tormented Son.

Mary is a queen, but now a classic queen of tragedy whose role is silent suffering and whose presence in a way adds to the anguish of her Son. His pain is her pain . . . her reflected pain His pain as well.

ENTER THE HEROINE

In the noisy drama of the crucifixion there are, oddly enough, no words for Mary to speak.

Hers is the role of one who stands and waits, who suffers and is silent. She is acted upon, not acting. Her whole person, body and soul together, becomes like some tense, taut string instrument struck by rough hands to the awakening of harsh music and the shaking loose of dissonant chords.

Each roar of the crowd wrenches new fears from her tortured soul.

The counterpoint of the priests' taunts and sneers strikes her mother heart to protective love for her Son, whom they are rejecting, and to a deep longing to save them from their own folly and pride.

The presence of the brave beloved John beside her makes even more conspicuous the absence of the other Apostles. If he had not come, perhaps the priests and the mob leaders might have forgotten that once there had been a group that He called His disciples. The mere presence of John alone of all the Apostles punctuates with an exclamation point the dreadful statement of the others' cowardly flight.

John stands the solitary relic of the shattered apostolic college, the one faithful friend whose fidelity shouts aloud the shameful delinquency of the rest.

Mary's glance searches in a last-minute hope for Peter or James or the blustering Thomas. Her Son had long since ceased to seek them. But mothers have a way of going on in their hope. Perhaps at the

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end, she thinks, sheer pride will drive them back. Maybe a decent shame will overcome the wretched cowardice that thus far has been their one motivation. But when Mary's eyes find again the eyes of her Son, she knows that her search is vain.

A group of her faithful women friends, however, like a Greek chorus of mourners, closes in around her.

The other Marys and the pious Salome and the holy women who served her Son and His disciples during His public life have joined her in this last hour. Their longing to minister to Him is still strong. And with that frequent fatalism of women they probably feel that after His death He might receive from them what they were not permitted to give during His last hours of life.

Less strong than Mary, less drained dry of tears, these other women weep.

Like her but without her fierce urge to solace her dying Son, they stand in pathetic futility.

Their voices pick up the traditional chant for the heroic dying. But Mary's tongue can find no words. She can only stand, racked by a prayer that is much like her Son's when He was racked to a bloody sweat in Gethsemani.

There is nothing for Mary to do.

There are no lines for her to speak.

There is no service that she is permitted by God or man to offer her Son.

ENTER THE HEROINE

A heroine without lines . . . a leading character to whom has been assigned the part of something like an extra, and that part without gesture, without action, without movement, without force or grace.

Strange indeed, when action is regarded as the very essential element of drama.

Yet this silent assignment is not for long.

From the cross the Hero suddenly speaks to her. He is assigning to her her special place in His tragedy.

"Woman," He says, softly, addressing her in the fashion of Oriental respect and deep reverence, "behold thy son."

Her eyes drop from the lips — cracked, dry, bloodless — that addressed her in tender speech and turn slowly to John, who is standing within easy reach of her outstretched hand.

"Son," the dry, parched voice continues, and Mary knows that her Son is addressing John — "behold thy Mother."

Eagerly Mary lifts her arms, and John takes toward her the short stride needed to cover the space between them. His strong young arms are around her shoulders, and she folds him to her breast in the tender, protective clasp of motherhood.

Beneath the cross the Mother of the dying God accepts as substitute son a member of the human race that did Him to death.

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This new son, who is totally human, is asked to take over the love and care and protection of the woman who had mothered God Himself and had known what it meant to be loved and revered and watched over by the protective providence of her Son, who was divine.

Were this gesture merely the entrusting of His Mother to His friend and His friend to His Mother, the scene would still be one of amazing tenderness and gracious power. There is something wonderfully dramatic in the words by which a dying Son remembers to provide for His widowed mother. There is something touching in the sight of this devoted Friend, stripped of all else, giving away in final gesture the Mother who has come to His cross deathbed (His one remaining possession), the woman who has been the only human source of His very life.

Deserted by all the other Apostles, He gives this precious gift to the one who has been faithful. John receives from Him the magnificent privilege of playing son to the Mother of his dearest Friend.

Yet this is far from the all of that gesture.

The Church, which has studied with meticulous affection these scenes around the deathbed of a God, has found deeper meaning in the action. The long tradition of Christian saints has found in the words and actions something strangely paradoxical.

That gesture of Christ's does not give only a single Apostle into the care of His Mother, nor does

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it give that Mother into the protection of only one man. In that dramatic scene Christ gave mankind its new Mother and asked the woman who had mothered Him now to mother all His brothers and sisters until the very end of time.

Saintly writers have reminded their readers that, though Mary gave birth to Christ without birth pains, she mystically bore her other children, humanity given into her maternal keeping on Calvary, in birth throes that matched the agonies of the Saviour's Passion.

It was not alone around the shoulders of the young and innocent John that Mary placed her maternal arms; they closed about the whole sad and sinful human race. The whole breed of men and women, for whom Christ was dying, now had not only a Saviour but a Mother as well, the very woman who had mothered the Son of God and would now be Mother of His Mystical Body.

Mary accepted sinful humanity from the hands of her dying Son.

Christ begged all men and women to see in His Mother the Mother of the human race.

If this is true, and it surely is, the gesture of the heroine becomes arrestingly dramatic. What she does is absolutely heroic.

For John is not merely John; he is all human beings, sinners and saints, guiltless and guilty.

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Mary takes to her heart less the one devoted Apostle than the whole noisome mob about her, priests and soldiers and faithless Jews and callous Romans.

In the tragedy of Calvary she had been assigned a part terrifying in its implications.

Playing Mother to the Saviour was a sweet and gracious role. Caring for the house of the gentle Joseph was a charming assignment. Even mothering the tender John could be a joy.

But her assignment is now frighteningly different, demanding deep heroism.

She was to mother — the murderers.

She was henceforth to serve, not the dying Hero or the Christ rising from the tomb, but the men who had slain Him.

She was to take to her heart the very people who had broken His heart.

She was to be protectress and intercessor not only for the future saints and martyrs and for great penitents who would come to her with grief-riven souls but for men upon the scaffold and women of vicious lives, for the cruel, the shameful, the greedy, the lustful. She was to take to her heart the whole hideous brood for which her Son was dying, the very ones who were even then triumphing in the death they had brought about.

Her part is now to protect those who refused to protect Him.

ENTER THE HEROINE

She must intercede for the very ones who were silent at the trials or who called loudest for His death.

She is to beg forgiveness for the judges who pronounced sentence upon Him.

She is to love the unlovely and forgive the unforgiveable.

So it is that Mary places her protecting motherly arms not only around John; her arms are about me too.

For I can slip swiftly and without protest from her into the place that John occupied against her Immaculate Heart.

I can feel her arms around my shoulders. She does not wince as she tightens those arms protectingly about me.

She murmurs words of motherly love over me, the murderer who condemned her Son to torment, who denied I ever knew Him, who broke the Saviour's heart.

Many a drama has ended with the arms of the heroine closing in reward and the rich promise of love around the victorious hero. This time the arms of the heroine close protectingly, forgivingly in maternal love around me, the villain of the piece.

THE CHORUS OF THE MOB



HERE are in life few other elements that have the dramatic possibilities that a mob has.

Grim terror follows the wake of a mob that pours into a city, bent on looting . . . a mob that grows tense and bestial as it clots into the madness of a lynching . . . a mob gone insane in panic — the passengers and crew of a sinking ship, investors watching the waves of a market collapse sweeping away their lifeboats and safety belts.

But fiercely dramatic as is any mob, an organized mob has its own special form of visual and auditory terror. Its animal fury is controlled by a clear, cold, plotting brain. Its apparently capricious movements have been planned and rehearsed. Its surges and shouts are not purposeless, but skillfully manipulated by experts who stand outside or back of or slightly aloof from the mob and explode the insensate fury with the skill of artillery captains.

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In the tragedy of Calvary just such a mob played its chorus part.

It added an element of terror that made the whole drama that much more frightening.

A controlled roar beat — as the sound of waves beat — against a small island of death. The monotony of repeated blasphemy was occasionally punctuated by a woman's nervous, hysterical scream of laughter or the sharp voice of some wit who spat a ribald joke or insult at Incarnate Wisdom on the cross.

The murmur from the crowd was almost continuous. An occasional sharp roar rose with measured, almost baton-directed cadence to prove how well the mob had been trained to its part. The blasphemy was not spontaneous; it was practiced. The movements and choral chants were too perfect to be improvised. They had been designed and written by skillful authors who knew precisely how to fit them into the steadily rising action.

At bottom this mob, like all mobs, was scum.

That same greasy scum in every age and from every nation has been spewed by the slums to find thrill and excitement and its favorite entertainment in death by execution.

Jerusalem, like all big cities, had its slums and its rookeries of fetid "tenements" that festered in evil and darkly hid away from the normal occupations of mankind its abnormal hatchings. Out of these slums, as out of all slums, came the criminal

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of that day — the men of blood, the women whose place of business was the streets, the distorted spirits that had been bred in filth and nurtured to immaturity by a sickly, stunting want.

For such a mob an execution was the most wonderful play.

Death was the chief actor, and in the end death was always the winner.

That very fact made them forget for a time the misery that was theirs in watching the misery of others. Their own lives, failures almost from the start, seemed almost successful compared with the fate of the criminal whom the law had finally hounded to a death that shouted his failure to the world.

There was sharp delight in the sight of blood and a sweet torture that struck the nerves and set tingling the emotions when the hammers fell on nails that pierced human flesh. No banner planted in victory could evoke from the spectators more violent cries than could the cross under its living, keenly sensitive burden of human flesh as the base of the wood was dropped into the open earth.

This time, however, the mob had a special treat.

This fellow, doomed to die, had only yesterday been the talk of Jerusalem. A few of them had scuttled out to see what was happening. . . . Just last Sunday He had been the center of some sort of

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parade. Of course it was, to their thinking, a pretty flat parade — no bands, no rhythmic beating of cobblestones by steel-greaved legs, no bark of military orders, no roll of war chariots or swish of light dispatch cars. Just women and children and a few old fellows and some obviously poor youths waving palm branches at a man who rode quietly upon an ass.

Some of them had managed on that afternoon, thanks to skilled pickpocket fingers, to filch a few cloaks before the owners had been able to retrieve them from the roadway. But by and large it had been a dull show, and it had bored them.

But in the days that had passed since that Sunday, somehow the word had spread that there would be a procession very different from the one on that Sunday. The word grew definite before today's dawn and they had poured out blindly, blinking at the unaccustomed sunlight, to give the projected events of the day, whatever they might be, their critical look.

It might be quite an affair. In fact the flying rumors indicated that it would be. So the men practiced up their more obscene jests. The women cackled less at these stale jokes than in anticipation of blood that might be shed. The children took speculative shots with rocks and mud to see how trustworthy was their aim; they were pleased when their aim proved good enough to hit a Man moving slowly under the drag of a cross.

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As things turned out, the day much outlived its promise. They never could have anticipated the delightful affair. First of all the executed man was by His own claims a King. And what could possibly be funnier than royalty thrust down into the gutter? There had been rumors that He had worked in His day a variety of wonders. They had passed the hours in the titillating anticipation that maybe He would pull one of these wonders out of His sleeve. Something had stopped the flow of His tricks, however, and they felt a little relieved. You couldn't be too sure about spells that conjurers put upon you or what dirty tricks magic might toss in your direction. Anyhow you could hardly expect a prestidigitator to be at his best when his hands were nailed to a cross.

The man had in their hearing frequently been called good. So what? Let this be a warning to all and sundry: the good or the evil, the virtuous or the vicious, all ended on top of the same pile of refuse. Even the great must die. Likely enough, the good in return for their virtue won the reward of having an executioner as their final valet.

So the scum eddied in the court of the priests and then pushed up the steps until they washed against the piles held firm by Roman swords. They headed a few experimental rocks at Him as He was shuttled back and forth between Herod and Pilate.

Somewhere along the way they had learned a few

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lines of chorus easy enough to sing; so they threw all their lung power into "Crucify Him" and caught up with resounding gusto a new and fascinating slogan: "His blood be upon us and upon our children!"

Yet all the while, hardly knowing it, they were being welded into a highly organic group. They had become less a conglomerate mob than a corporate mob. They ceased to be the haphazard sweepings of stultifying slums. They had purpose and direction and some sense of accomplishment.

The rather vague men who had brought them hints of the day's promised excitement had been well dressed and had spoken with an educated accent. When the mob finally poured out of their alleys, released hounds sniffing the day's quarry, they found without resentment that the beaters of the bushes had become masters of the hunt. Like normal underdogs they accepted the leadership without comment.

So they followed these well-dressed fellows, who clearly knew what was up. They pursued them without waste of movement to precisely the spot where at that moment the fresh and interesting scene was being enacted. They found themselves waiting and ready to give the priests an encouraging shout when they emerged at dawn from their palace and walked briskly ahead of the bound Captive, who already looked much the worse for His stay in the dungeon.

The mob clotted impatiently around Pilate's balcony and seconded with loud outcry whatever the

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priests might be saying to the governor. When they grew restive and would have left, their leaders calmed them with the guarantee of fun soon to come. And the fun came.

They made a tremendous racket as they surged around Him on His way to Herod. And though they did not know exactly how His transformation came about, they roared with laughter when He emerged from Herod's palace dressed like a court jester.

Slightly later, when Pilate grew hesitant and a solid block of votes was needed to swing his decision, their leaders gave the signal, and the mob delivered in a chorus of demands for His death.

The priests had arranged the signals, and from their place on the steps outside Pilate's palace (they went no farther because of the contaminating court of the pagan governor) they set the tempo for this "spontaneous" demonstration. The leaders picked up the cue and tossed the timing to the crowd. Arms seemed to be beating the rhythm for them, so they bellowed in delighted unison. They were a bit surprised to find themselves shouting, "We have no king but Caesar"; but it made a powerful chant, so they said it over and over to the accompaniment of rhythmic stamping feet and drumming palms.

That did the trick. That night they could boast to their friends how they had put it over on Pilate and got what they wanted . . . whatever this was that they wanted.

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The parade up Calvary had been the triumphant march of an army swinging to victory. Dirty hands heaved mud. Stony hearts propelled rocks. Tongues that scarcely remembered a prayer recalled the sacred name well enough to use it in the context of blasphemy.

Then when the executioners flung the Victim to the ground, the mob roared approval. Alert, tensely eager, afraid they would lose any ringing blow of the hammer or any cry of pain from the Man, they stood taut in silence, breaking the quiet with a shout of triumph as the executioners swung the cross aloft and they looked up into the tortured face of the Man it bore.

Well rehearsed! A convincing mob scene!

Beautifully directed, you priests and leaders.

The great, hulking, almost senseless and certainly insensitive body of the mob had been controlled by cold, scheming brains. It had spoken with frightening conviction the curses and recriminations, the taunts and demands, the words of rejection it had learned from priestly lips.

It was a beautiful piece of stagecraft.

What the mob had failed to recognize was the fact that they had been taken over.

All their actions and gestures, their wraths and their resentments, the words they spoke and the demands they made — all had been planned by the priests a long, long time in advance.

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As the fame of Jesus rose, the priests' determination not to lose their places, powers, privileges, or prerogatives grew stronger. Jesus was not to be allowed to supplant them in dominion over the people.

In a fierce attack that succeeded largely because they did not dream He would dare it, Jesus had driven their agents out of the markets that lined the temple courts. That had been a black day for the priests. For a few hours their carefully operated concessions fell to zero.

All that was soon restored, but they would never forget their fury and their momentary fright. Beyond that they recalled with cheeks that dangerously flamed how He had lashed out at them and with a fierce gesture of disdain had stripped away their white garments. Nor could they forget the popping eyes of the spectators at that time who looked up at them in wonder and sudden distaste.

If this Jesus had thought for a moment to strip them of their standing, cut off their sources of wealth, and turn the people against them, He was more of a fool than they had reassured their associates He actually was.

Then when word came of the triumphant procession on Palm Sunday, their first rush of fright gave way to a sounder second conviction. If the volatile people could so easily be whipped to a parade of triumph, they could probably be whipped with equal facility to a procession of death.

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The sort of admirers who made up the Palm Sunday demonstration were, the priests rightly reckoned, just the sort who would be terrified by a smelly mob. Hence the priests' messengers to the slums and the quiet mustering of the chorus for Good Friday.

The next time Jesus marched, the priests determined, it would be theirs to pick the marchers, to assign the line of march, to take their places in the reviewing stand, and to master-of-ceremony the saturnalia that followed the procession's climax — which would be the giddy dance of death.

So the demonstration had been entirely planned, and so it was carried through to a success beyond their most soaring hopes. The mob had lapped up the whole project. They had rushed out clamoring for the death of a Man most of them had never even seen. They picked up and repeated every line that was tossed them. They soon caught on to the chant of blood and the chorus of death, and they beat the stage with a dance so wildly ecstatic, so over-toned with obscene laughter and adroit blasphemy that the priests could stand aside in fresh admiration of a chorus perfectly drilled to every nuance and posture.

Now the mob, priests and people alike, formed a solid chorus line around the hill. They had become one single throat lifting a single cry; they seemed one single pair of gloating eyes concentrated in hungry intensity upon the Hero and His agony.

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Priests and people together knew the thrill of a magnificent performance beautifully rehearsed and carried through to final curtain.

Together they strained forward, now largely silent in fear that anything might be lost.

Indeed all the promises made to the scum had been fulfilled.

The mighty had fallen.

They could gloat over the bitter irony of a Saviour incapable of saving Himself.

The ambitious Leader had Himself been led by a rope. And now, not only was He unable to lead; He was totally unable even to move.

Here was the Miracle-Worker who out of the panoply of His tricks could find no trick clever enough to rescue Himself.

A shout went up again, and this time it was a shout of something like self-congratulation, of real delight that their scene had been so perfectly played. The tragedy had gone through without a hitch. Nothing now stood between them and the continued rattle of applause. A little like a delighted cast who, the curtain having fallen on what they know to have been a hit, laugh and embrace and slap friendly shoulders . . . in such a way priests and scum felt close kinship in the tremendous performance they had put over.

As they stand in this delight of self-praise, we

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might do well to examine this mob a little more carefully and see these priests with closer scrutiny; they somehow seem strangely familiar.

What is this mob really?

Who are these priests who led them with such consummate skill?

Even a little study through our opera glasses makes the answer vividly clear: these priests are God's own representatives. They are the ordained ministers of God's own religion. Upon their hands is the oil of consecration. They alone could offer the acceptable sacrifice. Theirs is an authority to speak God's truth and proclaim and defend God's Law.

Their magnificent powers have been granted them by the Almighty Himself. Because of these powers and through their dedication to God, their profession was honored, their persons marked for reverence and prestige, and their words powerful enough to sway the people — even against their Saviour.

Yet these are the leaders who, failing to lead them to life in God, led the people instead to God's death. They had lost their own way; they did not want to be shown the way, the truth, and the life. They had only the coldest, most formalistic, bored attitude toward the prefiguring sacrifices of the Temple; they were strangely eager to play an unintentional part in the sacrifice of Calvary.

Who are the people who made up the mob on Calvary's stage?

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These are not just any people; they are God's chosen own.

Often before in serried parades God had led them patiently, skillfully, lovingly.

He had marched at their head, a pillar of strength and light, as He led them out of Pharaoh's power. He had been their general as they marched around the walls of Jericho and the fortifications tottered at the sound of a trumpet and His name.

He had Himself been their personal King in the days of their greatness. And when they were captive in Babylon, He had led them back to their Promised Land.

Again and again in their strangely dramatic history these chosen people had deserted their God. Had they from the consequent evil and miseries and soul loneliness of those desertions learned nothing?

They had turned from Him to a gilded calf.

They had run from His protecting smile to grovel before a hundred obscene, filthy gods.

They had grown bored with His kingliness and demanded instead a tyrannous despot to be their ruler.

They danced before idols that were demons and knelt to gods of bronze and stone and offered their children to Moloch and their daughters to Astarte.

Yet always they came crawling back to beg their Father to forgive them — until the next time that they grew weary and ran away.

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Now they deserted their God with a brutal finality.

In this final and terrifying gesture of rejection the mob that was God's chosen people and the priesthood that He Himself had ordained to His friendship and high honor cast Him brutally aside.

Christ Jesus was God's messenger, but His people did not want His message.

Here before them was God's Son. But they had turned from this Son with the same callous rejection they had shown His Father.

God had once again offered to march at their head to the bloodless victory of His kingdom over the world. But this time they had taken matters in their own hand: They had marched Him up the hill and nailed His feet in order that never again could He lead them to green pastures, to love, to life.

"Away with Him! away with Him! crucify Him! . . . We have no king but Caesar!"

With grim finality they had deserted God.

God had no choice but to desert them.

Yet the one Person in this drama who gives voice to the appalling meaning of their choice is not one of the villains. The only One who cries out in protest, who sees what has happened and is struck by the horror of it is the Hero Himself.

Jesus Christ cries out His wild, almost frantic protest.

"My God," cries the Hero, "My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?"

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Again the drama is cut by a scene of complete surprise.

The wrong person seems to be speaking that line.

Any of the mob, surely any of the priests, any of that crowd that had deserted God, could well look up and see the averted face of an offended, rejected Creator and Father.

Rather is it the innocent Christ who sees the averted face of the Father.

How could this possibly be?

Christ had been in all things completely faithful to His heavenly Father. The voice of God had acknowledged His shining obedience. It would be sheerest folly to suggest that at the very end God could or would desert this well-beloved Son in whom He had been well pleased.

Yet it is the voice of Christ that utters the dramatic line. Christ, not the villain, speaks of deserting and cries aloud to God not to turn away His face in anger.

The explanation is only as simple as are the other major paradoxes of Christianity. For the innocent Jesus, Christ the Hero, is playing a part. He is under sentence of death because He is the Priest of priests and the Jew of Jews.

Innocent and sinless, He is nonetheless out of all humanity the most completely typical representative of the Jewish priesthood and the chosen people.

God the Father looking down upon the drama sees

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in His own Son the High Priest. He sees in Him the very embodiment of the Jewish people, that ultimate seed that, coming from Adam through Abraham, had been the core of Jewish greatness and the reason for His divine choice of them.

The priests had deserted their God. So it is the Priest upon the cross who realizes with terror that God has deserted them.

The chosen people have chosen to crucify the God who chose them. Their God has turned away, and from the cross the Jew of Jews sees God accept the invitation to be gone and cries out in the horror of this desertion.

Alone among them all, Christ, Priest of priests and Jew of Jews, sinless Man among all sinful mankind yet Man who stands as representative of sinful humanity, Christ alone recognizes the horror of that moment. Once too often they have deserted their God. Now their God deserts them. God will leave the priests their barren, empty Temple. He will leave the people a land emptied of its meaning. They have refused to accept the flowering of their seed, the hope of their race, the purpose of their law, and the fulfillment of their Temple, and God is wearied with this devotion to sin.

So the voice of the Hero cries out to God, begging Him not to make this final step.

"My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?"

In their blindness the priests and the scum cannot

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see what they have done and what they have lost; when they proclaimed, "We have no king but Caesar," God picked up the cue with all its tragic consequences.

They are blind. But Christ sees. Christ knows. Christ realizes.

So His voice is taut with horror.

His cry is one almost of despair.

He protests the awful desertion of God by the human race and the terrible corollary of mankind's desertion by God.

Almost He shouts out in fright.

He cannot bear what He has seen — the averted face of a rejected Father in heaven.

It is hard to resist the momentum of a mob. One is swept along quite without one's willing, often under an impulse that seems not one's own.

So it has been with us who should know better.

We have moved along with the mob of that proud but pitiful world so guilty of deliberate blindness and of systematic hardness of heart that Christ sadly said of it that He did not pray for it.

Sin is not less terrible because it is a mob activity. It is really more terrible when it is multiplied by the mob.

Sin does not cease to be ugly and repulsive because it becomes the fashion. Fashion serves only to make it easy and the object of polite attention.

Standing in the good graces of the rich and the

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powerful does not eliminate the guilt of sinners any more than does the sinking into the mass anonymity of a lynching crowd absolve the participant from murder.

Nor is sin less terrible because our clever leaders defend it, exploit it, promote it, headline it, use it as the stuff of laughter and the bait of advertising, make their fortunes out of it, and mount it on their climb to power.

There is fresh terror in the thought that sin is the business of those who pretend to lead the human race and that the clever make their livings out of the business of the Devil.

All this I know.

Membership in a mob does not cut or cancel my responsibility.

My voice still rises clearly to the ears of the Hero as with a million others I cry out for His death or march approvingly up the hill of Calvary in company with uncounted other murderers.

I cannot excuse my sin because it is merely one of many. My vote is heard by the listening Pilate when I cast it against the life of the Saviour.

Yet it is true that in the drama of Christ's death I may step from my place in the chorus and repudiate my part with the mob. I can slip away from the priests and leaders who knot together protectively against their fears.

I can change my lines, rewrite my speeches, ac-

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cept the lines and speeches that the divine Author hoped I would speak.

This I must do.

I shall not forsake God, even for the most brilliant men or the most beautiful women — not for leaders in fashion, politics, business, or the arts. Let them cry out for His death, as they persistently do, and marshal the mobs of the earth against Him; they must not mislead me.

I shall not think to hide myself from God in the ranks of any blood-hungry mob nor in the more polite mobs that are the money-changers and fashion experts and society leaders and that desperately misled multitude called the world.

Christ dramatically cried aloud the terrible line that told of God's threatened desertion.

The meaning of that totally unexpected speech comes in a flash. It is a case of dramatic mistaken identity.

How deeply dramatists have always loved cases of mistaken identity — the hero who plays the fool only to confound the villains . . . the villains unmasked by the hero . . . the heroine disguised to win the love of the hero . . . the noble hero humbly serving the lovely maid until the moment when he can reveal himself to her gratitude.

Here is mistaken identity raised to a mystery and a divine wonder.

Christ the Hero hanging upon the cross is dis-

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guised as the villain. The faithful Son takes the place of the faithless children. The innocent one is marked with the guilt of humanity. He is there in the stead of those who deserve that death for the evil they have done.

And God accepts the plot. He recognizes the substitution but acts as if Christ were the sinner, the guiltless Jesus guilty mankind.

God the Father turns away in disgust from the false priest, from the blood-greedy mob, from the sinner, from the wicked . . . from me.

And Christ knows in our place the horror of divine desertion, God's ultimate punishment for the sins of mankind.

My prayer should be simple yet deep:

May the agony that struck the heart of the Saviour upon the cross never be mine. May the line He spoke never need to be uttered by my lips. May I never desert my God in life or at the hour of death. And may the desertion that the Saviour experienced never be known by me.



THIS DRAMA TOO KNEW LOVE

AT THE heart of almost any great dramatic story lies a core of love.

The traditional cases are known to everyone.

The love of a young man and a young woman who loved too wisely and far from well is the tragedy of *Romeo and Juliet*. *King Lear* is the story of a father's love for his daughters, with the spotlight on the only one of the three who loved him in return. The saint whose story has inspired the most dramatic treatment is that of Francis of Assisi, whose love for Lady Poverty was merely a complement to his love for the poor Jesus of Nazareth.

When the drama is the story of pure love, its forward action ends with a happy curtain. When the story is one of lust, the story heads for tragedy at its most sordid.

The drama of Calvary knows high and beautiful love.

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The love of the Mother and the Son, Heroine and Hero, is striking, inspiring. The whole motivation of the story is, truth to tell, the underlying motif of the great love of God for mankind, the love that led the Son of Man to lay down His life for His friends.

But since the dramatic plot is a grim and terrifying tragedy, we need not be reminded that the story is one not only of love but of deadly lust.

There is hardly a more tragic note in the whole course of the action — certainly no more pathetic line spoken or heard — than the thirsting cry for love that was wrenched from the dry, parched throat of the dying Lover of the human race.

No one who understands the Passion thinks for a second that the cry of thirst that broke the momentary silence was spoken out of a thirst for water or wine. Christ significantly turned His head away from the sponge placed at His lips, though it was saturated with a mixture designed to ease pain and deaden both the thirst and the sense of feeling inspired by the thirst.

Christ thirsted for love.

Christ longed for that love which He had given so freely and been denied so constantly.

"I thirst" was a challenge to a world that was prodigal of love toward everyone but the Christ of the loving Sacred Heart.

Upon the stage of the Passion walk two figures,

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a man and a woman, who play dramatic roles in the whole tragedy. Both of them had known lust. One of them, the man, seems never to have known anything else but lust.

The man is Herod the Little.

The woman is Mary called the Magdalen.

They are the prototypes of all the sad and stupid people who since history's adolescence have tried to find happiness and joy, not in God's way of life and the way of rational nature, but in a debased copying of the animals in their lowest activities. Even the beasts would be ashamed of their bestial way of life.

Of all the *dramatis personae* in the tragedy of Calvary, Herod was the most despicable. To him was given an opportunity that any great man or good man would have seized. Indeed if only with an eye to history he would have played the wise man had he grasped that opportunity.

Pilate, eager to shrug off unpleasant responsibility, sent Jesus off to Herod and let him know that he would stand by any decision that Herod made. It was one of those rare chances that history throws in the lap of surprise characters.

Herod might have set the Saviour free.

The gesture would have been magnificent. The consequences would have meant the complete overthrow of a stinking plot.

Had Herod condemned Christ, his place in the

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Passion might have been a positive one. But Herod did nothing. He was up to his ears and eyes in lust. He lacked the insight or the imagination to recognize the character of the Hero before him. He never even glimpsed the opportunity that history's gesture and a Roman's shifty trick had placed within his reach.

Herod had too long played the libertine to be able to play any other part.

His father had been an intruder on the Jewish throne. He had murdered all who stood in his way and had culminated his career by slaughtering the Holy Innocents to clear the throne of a possible rival and to secure the throne for some descendant of his. That descendant, by a bit of bad luck for all concerned, turned out to be Herod the insignificant.

Herod went his father a great deal better.

If his father had slain the Innocents, the son slew innocence throughout the course of a lifetime. His wife was the bride of incest. His stepdaughter was Salome, a dancing girl who had learned to dance so effectively that Herod, inflamed by the wildness of her dancing, had sworn — to the approval of the others in the audience — to do anything she asked . . . up to and including the murder of John the Baptist.

Not that Herod had expected such a request even from the lustful girl and the mother who taught her

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her tastes in dancing and in blood. But when the request was made, not for the Baptist's death through some legal farce, but for the sort of death that would deliver his magnificent head like the head of a boar upon a platter, Herod gave in. Perhaps he feared that in the event of his refusal she wouldn't dance again. Perhaps he found it easy, as the lustful do, to take the easy step from lust to murder.

When he heard that Pilate was sending him Jesus and asking for a decision on Him, Herod felt only annoyance. What right had the Roman to toss his responsibility over to him like this? The whole business interfered with his leisure and his fun, and that was provoking.

Languidly he looked up from the cushion-deep divan on which he slouched, pulled a cup of sweetened wine a little closer to his lips, winked at one of the maids in waiting, and turned to glance contemptuously at Jesus the infinitely pure.

The Saviour stood before Herod. He was already drained of much blood and thirsting after a night without sleep or water. But He was coming close to the end of a life that had given love so freely and received it so grudgingly . . . and His Sacred Heart was deeply thirsty.

Herod, we may be sure, fancied himself a great lover.

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Probably among his acquaintances he bragged of his conquests, the girls he had loved, the queens who had been gracious with their favors. It would never have dawned on him that Christ would call that anything but love.

Certainly he would have been totally mystified by the pure love that was the desire of the Saviour. He had never conceived of a love devoid of lust. Yet it was such a love that Christ craved, a pure love that would make the world safe and beautiful for mankind's imperiled future. He saw that love as an unselfish love that dared first to love God with an entire heart, soul, mind, and strength, and then went on to love one's neighbor as oneself.

He saw love as the giving of self, the cup of cold water held to thirsting lips, the clothing of the naked, the food given to the hungry. He saw it reaching out toward the happiness of others and taking happiness for self only on the certain and equal rebound.

Early in His teaching career Christ had spoken a classic line: "Blessed are the clean of heart, for they shall see God."

The man before whom He had been dragged was the very antithesis of the man Christ had called blessed. Indeed it remained for Herod to give by startling contrast vivid proof of the truth of Christ's promise.

The clean of heart should see God.

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Obversely the dirty of heart could not know God even if they met Him face to face. The impure were so hoodwinked by the flesh that they could not cut through the blinds to look upon the face of God incarnate.

The man upon the eider-down cushions probably rated himself shrewd and clever. He had been places and seen things. He had traveled earth's wonders and appraised the beauty of many women and coolly calculated the character of many men.

Now the God of heaven and earth stood before him. Divinity thinly veiled in flesh was within reach of his hand. Perhaps in affected imitation of a style current among the Roman nobles he picked up a monocle cut from a gem and through it scrutinized the prisoner who stood before him. But that would have helped little. The pure see with the intuition of their sinless souls.

Christ stood silent, not so much as glancing at the obscene ruler and the soiled beauties who were his favorite attendants. He did not deign to look in the direction of Herodias, the incestuous wife, who had her own cushioned throne within easy reach of a whisper.

God stood before Herod.

But Herod was too filthy of soul to see or recognize God.

He was so enthralled with flesh that all he could see was flesh; he could not pierce through the flesh

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of human nature to find divinity almost transparently hidden beneath.

Pleasure-loving, however, as are all men of lust, he did see in the Prisoner one interesting possibility. The written report that the guards had brought mentioned something about miracles . . . wonders . . . tricks at which the populace had goggled. Evidently He had pulled rabbits out of hats or juggled a rope expertly or taken eggs from turbans or palmed dice.

Out of the tedious business of questioning an accused who completely bored Him, Herod thought he might snatch a bit of fun for himself and his guests. If the Fellow was a juggler, He had the chance of a lifetime, the opportunity to perform before a king. Not every street magician could hope for a command performance.

"I hear that You know some sort of magic," he probably said, in his more affected voice. After all, one shouldn't encourage mountebanks by seeming too interested. "How about a trick or two for us? We might find them amusing and regard You with somewhat more tolerance."

Christ acted as if He had not even heard.

The insult passed without answer.

Students of the Scriptures have been quick to note that Christ spoke not a single word to Herod. For all others He had considerate, forthright answers. For Herod, He had only silence.

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What use would His speech have been in this case?

The loutish fellow who was placed on the throne by murderers, accomplished with the conniving of a woman, was too sotted to understand the voice of truth even if it were shouted at him. He was too sunk in the quicksands of lust to have energy left for the simplest act of faith, the recognizing of a miracle. He would have disdained decency had the Lord been decent with him.

So it was that the Saviour of the world came to Herod and went from him in silence.

Herod looked upon the Son of God and saw only a stupid clown; he was too dull to seize the only opportunity of his mountebank career.

In complete boredom Herod turned his court look upon the Saviour, ordered Him dressed in the traditional garb of a court jester — and then suddenly relished the cream of his own jest. By Jupiter! he probably swore, in Roman fashion, this was choice. Let the soldiers make a fool of the Fellow . . . and let the dancing girls whirl about Him, throwing roses — thorns uppermost — in His stupid face.

Even Shakespeare injected clowns and buffoons into his tragedies. Usually they were good-natured fellows, simple and stupid or perhaps a shade more intelligent than the rest of the characters.

Into the tragedy of Christ struts a buffoon, Herod the loutish clown. Only he is not a merry fellow;

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he is obscene. He is not good natured; he is always close to murderous fury. Wit gone, as often happens with the world's clowns, he has no humor left but the humor of dirt and bodily functions and immoral filth. He gets his laughs out of the pain of others. He has reached a point where he feels that decent people are ridiculous and pure men are fools.

Yes indeed the Man before him clearly is pure . . . so clearly He is a fool and should be treated as a fool.

Herod roars in great sobs of obscene laughter, knowing that the court will talk for days of how he, their king, had such an eye for good drama, hilarious comedy, and exciting dancing. He had been able to turn a courtroom into a burlesque, a scene of judgment into a gigantic jest, and the silent Prisoner into a butt and a stooge.

Then like all sensualists he is quickly weary of his own joke.

He orders the Hero of the drama out of his presence. His dancing girls drop wearily back onto their cushions. His soldiers shove the jester-clad Figure into the street. And back Christ goes to Pilate. In callous indifference (the ultimate resultant of lust) Herod returns to the boredom of his life and the eternal sameness of sins of the flesh.

Let Pilate make the decision. He, Herod, must return to the business of love-making. And he does.

So it was that Christ came into the house of one

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of history's great lovers. There He found a lout, a clown, a buffoon, a caricaturist of love, a blind man whose eyes had been so long concentrated on one foul object that he saw nothing else.

It was one of the horrible scenes in the many horrible scenes of the Passion.

Now from the cross the thirsting gaze of Christ searched for someone who would hold up to His thirsting and now dying lips the cup of innocent, unselfish love.

There was no love in the eyes of the cold, hard priests.

The mob knew only, like Herod, love's ugly counterfeit.

The love of the Apostles was hiding in dark cellars, blown there by the swift breath of peril.

Mary the Mother? Yes in her there was a great welling up of love for Him. From John? Surely.

But who else?

Then the gaze of the Saviour drops to the foot of the cross . . . and there lies the most dramatic woman in the whole tragedy of Calvary.

She is exactly the type that dramatists have always sought — young, beautiful, notoriously gay, the toast of the city that proudly gave her its name, a woman who juggled hearts as she would crystal balls, who trod with gilded sandals down the bright flowered pathway of her springtime years.

Mary of Magdala . . . Mary, once the woman of

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lust . . . Mary who had loved for the thrill of loving . . . Mary, pattern of fashion and model of styles — but now Mary the penitent . . . Mary the sinner . . . practicing to be a saint . . . Mary who had bathed the Saviour's feet and her own sinful soul in the floods of her tears.

Even in her penitence Mary is dramatic.

Many courtesans in those days were actresses . . . and actresses always were courtesans. So the penitent courtesan, though the devils had been driven from her body, still knew best one way to express her emotions — violent tears, wild gestures, the rending of her once beautiful gown, the tossing of her long, now unbraided hair.

If Mary the Mother stood in quiet dignity, Mary the penitent flung herself on her knees before the cross. If Mary the Mother folded her arms around the young John, Mary the penitent embraced the wood of Christ's execution. If Mary the elder stood a little away, where she could watch with love and pity every motion of her Son's head, every twitching of His body, Mary Magdalen wanted the blood from His wounds to flow into her hair, wanted to press the flesh of His chilling feet against her warm cheeks.

There at the feet of Christ, Mary Magdalen continued what she dared to do in the house of the Pharisee: she bathed Christ's feet with her tears and dared the soldiers drive her back from her work of

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loving mercy. Christ had changed her life. If His death meant her death, it was the death she most desired for herself.

Yet even in her grief she must have seen the appalling differences between the Man now hanging in death agony above her and the Man she had seen on that memorable day when for her a real life and pure love began.

On that day she was dressed, as always, for conquest. She had touched her ears with perfume and placed on her well-tended hands her showiest rings. All men interested her. She had heard much of this new Wonder-Worker . . . and perhaps she would casually pass His way.

Then by chance down the highway she saw Him coming.

The story of that meeting was written in the deepest recess of her soul. She recognized Him clearly — tall, strong, dominant. A leader, He, among men. She preened herself for the moment when she would pass Him, reaching her full height as she did . . . only to find herself plunging down into depths she never knew existed.

For He had looked at her as no man had ever looked upon her.

Not with carnal love, nor desire, nor invitation . . . only with pity . . . and with something else that she did not yet recognize as the overwhelming love of God for sinners, the anguished desire to save her

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from all that she had thought precious and worth more than her immortal destiny.

Everything was changed for her at that moment.

It was the start of a new life. It was the birth of the first and only love she ever really knew.

Now everything in Him seemed to be changed — except that solid core of love and mercy.

No beauty was left in Him, none of the charm that had compelled the multitudes and confounded the devils, no miraculous power to bring even a drop of water to His brutally parched throat.

For that matter she was changed too.

In the moment of her conversion she had turned from lust to love. She had used her perfumes as aphrodisiacs; now they were ointment for His feet. Her eyes had often glittered with invitation; now they were often bright with tears of love and sorrow. She had turned from the betrayal of all and any man to the love and innocent service of the only Man, who was her forgiving God, her Father, Father of this wildly prodigal daughter.

Above her His beloved voice cried out, "I thirst."

Her head shot back as from a blow.

Behind her the stupid soldiers were spearing a sponge. Fools! As if that would quench the thirst of a God dying for love. As if they could even reach the lips of that Lover of all the world who wanted only the living chalice of human affection.

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She was on her feet, her face lifted in adoration.

In a gesture compellingly dramatic Mary lifts higher than her arms could reach yet without need of miracle the chalice of her purified love to the lips of the thirsting Lover of mankind.

From the woman who had known lust, Christ now knows stainless love.

By the woman who had been the courtesan, the thirsting God is given to drink.

As long as men have reported the dramatic stories of the human race, they have known that love and lust may be the great betrayers. No one can doubt the villain's part played by the lustful in the unhappiness of our kind. We know too well the repeated story of love gone evil, of human affection turned from good and centered on the very essence of all that is wretched and wrong.

Our own part in the tragedy is written in scarlet letters.

Yet even if we have played the fool for lust and with Herod mocked the pure Christ because He looked for innocent love, it is possible for us to change our part.

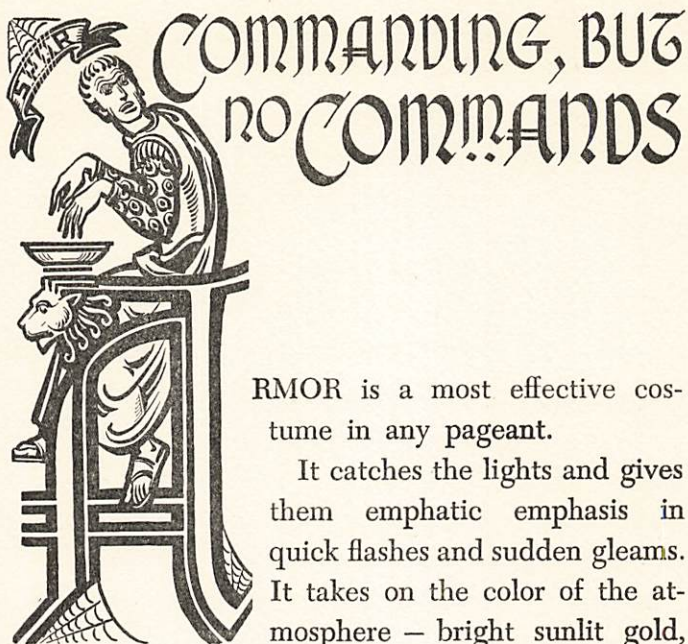
We can do what Herod failed to do — become so pure that through the transparent disguise of His flesh we can see clearly the divinity of the Saviour.

We can hold up to the dying Saviour pure or penitent love.

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We can pick up that cue line and with a gallant gesture answer His great "I thirst."

Slipping into the lovely role of Mary Magdalen, we can in a splendid dramatic movement offer our love for the satisfaction of the thirsting Christ.



COMMANDING, BUT no COMMANDS

ARMOR is a most effective costume in any pageant.

It catches the lights and gives them emphatic emphasis in quick flashes and sudden gleams. It takes on the color of the atmosphere — bright sunlit gold, dark angry scarlets, sullen purples. A mail-clad figure topped by a plumed helmet need only walk across the stage, and without uttering a single line, he catches the attention of an audience. From so shining a figure surely the spectators are right to expect a stirring speech, a challenge, news of victory.

The stage of Christ's tragedy had almost more than its share of armored men. The paschal moon had shone back palely from the breastplates of Temple guards moving pantherlike for the kill. There were visored guards about Him as He was dragged away to prison. Soldiers stacked the shells

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of their armor while, armored now in cruelty and sadistic lust, they beat Him to blood and fashioned a crown of thorns with their heavily gauntleted fingers.

Sentries in steel had held back the crowds with a fence of spears and had tramped heavily beside Him as He was moved from court to court. Roman guards filled the halls of Pilate's palace. Rome set its intricately uniformed legionnaires at the cross and before His tomb.

Now as the last scenes of the tragedy are planned in dimming light, the armor of these guards play reflectors to the angry red of the dwindling sun and the sudden terrifying flashes of lightning that split the skies as the earthquake splits the earth.

Armored actors had dramatic parts as the tragedy of Christ rushed forward to its catastrophe.

Yet no other armor offered such highly polished surface to false golden glow and little warmth as did the armor of Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor.

Rome of that age, proud, conquering, dominant Rome — compared to which Judea seemed a place of barren exile — was a city of ambitious men. It had become, as all dictatorially controlled places are, the paradise of the bureaucrats. There brain, ruthlessness, and cynical ability to sense the main chance and to spot and use the man with the most

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convenient shoulders got a smart man ahead with real speed.

The most important study pursued by up-and-coming people was flattery that got results with the big men who really mattered. Selfishness was a skilled art and greed a practical science. You moved ahead by using people until they had lifted you as high as they were able; then from your new height you kicked them down (it was the accepted thing).

The code of the jungle had gone civilized — not a pretty thing of course, but highly efficient. A successful man could be forgiven his lack of scruples if his method worked.

Among the thousand ambitious Roman men who strutted the Roman Forum and weighed the chances of the next big appointment and paid court to Caesar's current favorites, none was more unblushingly ambitious than Pilate.

He would have regarded himself as a typical man about Rome.

He had served in the army with more discretion than success. He had married a charming woman who played successful hostess to the men he brought home to the fashionable house he as yet could not afford. He knew the tastes of the right people and just how to bully and browbeat tradesmen when they shook unpaid bills in his face. His tailors and armorers catered to the most fashionable. He spent

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money where it was the best investment. And he had been for a number of years climbing rapidly to the upper-bracket incomes and toward the kind of appointment that meant a special nod from Caesar and a place in the Roman sun.

To achieve all this, a man had to strip himself of a lot of excess credulities, exploited friends, and outgrown acquaintances and had to shed inconvenient ideals and impractical morals. Thus encumbered, a man did not climb high or fast in Rome. So Pilate had shed and stripped without a qualm. And as he reached each successive ledge in his climb, he was proportionately a little less heavily burdened by scruples or the consideration of right and wrong.

In this highly practical attitude toward life he had long since dropped his faith in the gods. After all as a governor he would insist that religion was good for the herd; it kept them subservient. The sophisticated recognized that religion made a good talking point in a political speech and had its uses in the arts and in literature. As practical luggage for a man on the climb, a letter patent from Caesar about the emperor's current favorite was what really mattered.

Besides, as a world traveler he had looked the gods over speculatively and found them mainly futile. The Roman gods had sunk so low that they were favorite farcical characters in the more bawdy

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theaters. What the poet told of the loves and brawls of the gods was usually romantic nonsense, often sickening and silly. In fact their capricious conduct would make a dignified Roman embarrassed if he were caught imitating them. When Homer and Virgil had finished writing epic poetry about them, the gods had about served their highest purpose.

As for the gods of other lands, they were in the main dreadful, obscene beings. Most of them had died long, long ago. The gods of Egypt were immobile as the stone they were still used to ornament. The variegated gods and goddesses of conquered nations were in a generous and diplomatic Roman gesture embalmed for burial in the vacuous tomb of the Pantheon, which held such a motley of discordant gods that it was just as well they were notably dead.

After his appointment to Judea, Pilate had thought a bit about giving a look to Yahweh. He seemed to be a God more powerful than even the fabled Zeus and, if the religious frenzy of His people was any sign, very much alive. He had heard that one new prophet (coming after another notable leader, John the Baptist, whom Herod had quickly snipped off) taught in the name of this Yahweh a quite remarkable kind of doctrine. But Pilate, a procrastinator in all that did not regard his immediate advancement, never quite got around to giving the look.

He had not objected when his wife, womanlike, seemed impressed by the faith of the people over

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whom he ruled. It might even ingratiate him with the ruling class if his wife and lady paid them the compliment of visiting their Temple and offering a dove or two in sacrifice. Later on, perhaps, he'd have time to see whether this rather unique God had any more right to loyalty than had the other gods he had contemptuously discarded.

Of course there was one god who got more than casual gestures from the very practical Pilate. That was a very human god called Caesar.

Caesar had off and on been posturing as a god for quite some time. The senate had solemnly passed decrees of divinity with regard to him, and the statue of the emperor had its altar of incense and received adoring bows from people who knew what was good for them.

Pilate had no illusions about Caesar. He had been on parties where Caesar got drunk as a fool and slobbered over some pretty slave. He had seen him in mad rages strike mortally an offending servant. Pilate knew too much about Caesar's mental incapacity and moral obliquities to be fooled by this man who moved toward highly synthetic godhood. But a man who had ambitions bowed a diplomatic head at state functions and read the statutes of divinity with a sober, reverent face.

With the loss of faith in his gods, Pilate had lost faith in his fellow men.

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He found them revoltingly greedy when their greed clashed with his own. They were ignorant and vain and silly and cruel. They served time and licked sandals and mouthed the same old stale clichés with an atrocious air of cleverness and originality. As he rose to ever higher levels of authority, Pilate looked down with deeper distaste on the mob beneath him and up to the few above him with frank wonder how such dolts got or held their place and power.

Once on a time he had cultivated the philosophers.

He found a youthful excitement in their juggling of truth — more skillful juggling than that of circus acrobats handling metal balls. The philosophers made of truth a delicious game of words. Their pupils were taught to outsmart in argument, to outwit an opponent with sophistry or blast him with a brilliant play on words.

Truth was far less important to them than the wisecrack. They could parry an annoying argument with a frivolous query. When the discussion grew too serious and the disputant was bored, or when the argument went against you and you didn't know the answer, you knocked the other chap back on his heels with some question that he couldn't answer or with the swift introduction of an irrelevant subject that threw him totally off-balance.

As for the future life, Pilate had not thought about that for years. A man became too engrossed

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with the present life to wonder or worry about a life to come. He carefully studied what made the here and now successful and crammed with honor and power, what would be likely to lead to more prestige and more cash and credit. All else could wait.

So it was that Pilate was skeptical about everything except Pilate.

He doubted the value of anything except getting ahead.

He had reached a level sufficiently lofty from which to look down on practically the whole human race except Caesar and his intimates. And the fact that Caesar still remained above him made Caesar absorbingly of interest. Only Caesar could lean down, give him a hand, and pull him up a little higher. So Caesar was vitally important. In all things Caesar must be kept well in mind.

Onto the scene dominated by this commanding man was thrust the Prisoner. An utterly worldly man looked for the first time on an utterly unworldly, otherworldly Man.

Perhaps it would be more correct to say that though the stage-set called for Pilate's palace, it was Pilate who walked into the presence of Christ.

To the surprise of the plotters, who had thought that this scene could be played swiftly and with a minimum of dialogue, the governor gave Jesus a great deal of time and a flattering attention. He

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found the Prisoner intensely interesting. Crowded though his day was, he took time out to play questioner and to discuss with Him charges that the priests had supposed would meet with curt contempt from the governor.

Jesus came into the highly polished court looking His worst.

His cheek was torn from the impact of the gauntleted fist of a guard who had struck Him. His clothes were filthy and in shameful disorder. His hair and beard were matted with spittle, and He could not with His bound hands push the stray lock back into place. He carried with Him the dank, fetid stench of the dungeon into which He had been thrust. He was still pale from the agony in the garden and the sleeplessness of the night.

Yet to the annoyance of those who wanted the scene played very differently, Pilate greeted the Prisoner with respect. He talked to Him man to man and on the same level.

When the astounding Prisoner made clear claims to royalty, Pilate did not sneer, guffaw, or cry out, "Madman!" He considered the claims soberly, as if they might have more than a fantastic basis. Evidently he could glimpse majesty in the bound, disheveled Figure before him. Pilate had seen enough false royalty and tawdry majesty to be impressed with a Man who still looked in rags and filth surprisingly like the real thing in royalty.

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Pilate saw that the Prisoner had a kingly manner. He begged for nothing. He did not rage or bluster. He paid none of the sycophantic compliments by which even captured kings tried to bribe their judges. He pushed no angry claims and permitted no minimizing of His prerogatives. He did not try to bolster absurd statements with violent words. He made simple claims and let them stand on face value and with the backing of His personality.

So Pilate found himself in an inconvenient state of mind for a judge: positively he liked the Man he had been called on to judge.

He knew a commanding character when he saw one, and he found himself inclined to let the lead slip from himself to this dominant Man who was complete master of Himself and of the situation.

Suddenly the scene slips into reverse. Jesus is less the accused than the accusing. He offers no defense of Himself, but He clearly indicates the limits of Pilate's power. He quickly lifts the whole case from any attack upon Himself to the broader question of justice and truth.

And Pilate was deeply impressed, more moved than he himself knew.

Pilate too then, like Herod, stood face to face with his great chance.

Pilate was not the libertine that Herod was. Cruel, yes — as a professional soldier who leads

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pagan soldiers. Contemptuous of life, certainly; you couldn't walk with the conquering legions and be squeamish about blood. But deep down he had a Roman respect for justice, loved a fair trial (some-day he might want one for himself), and honored any opponent who stood his ground without backtracking or fawning and who struck back with words when brave words remained the only weapon.

Pilate and Jesus stood eye to eye, two tall, handsome, commanding men — the governor set in his place by Caesar, and the King of kings.

Some inner instinct suggested to Pilate that in this strangely compelling Man he might have found the one commander toward whom he could never have felt the slightest trace of contempt.

He the skeptic had found Someone who believed and who commanded belief, Someone who spoke reverently of truth and quite obviously was ready, if need be, to die for that truth.

The scene was growing entirely confused. The situation was rapidly getting out of hand, straying far from the priest-dictated plot. Pilate sensed that the King in chains was an important personage, that He could not be handled as most prisoners were. He had talked of a kingdom. . . . Pilate was shrewd enough to know that so-called eternal Rome perhaps rested on a pretty shaky foundation. Sudden leaders had a way of rising and taking over. Julius Caesar had done it . . . and then Augustus,

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a mere stripling. . . . Mark Anthony with his armies plus the fleets of Cleopatra had almost pulled the trick.

What then about this commanding Person who spoke with such confidence about His kingdom?

It was true that He was vague about His plans and laid no specifications or statistics before Pilate. He was clear only in this: that His kingdom was going to be different from any that history had known, briefly approved, and scrapped. Perhaps that fact alone was enough to make this whole business significant. If this Man had the scheme for a kingdom that did not depend upon armies or the whims of rulers . . . if He had some new force that would make Him and His imperial realm supreme . . .

Pilate shook himself almost angrily.

This prolonged dialogue that he had shared with this Man who was his prisoner suddenly seemed almost absurd. He, Pilate, had spoken his lines with all seriousness. He had listened to the answers with something like reverence. But when the Man before him suddenly used the word truth, it brought to the surface the skeptical cynicism of a lifetime.

Pilate broke the scene abruptly. He shrugged his magnificent shoulders as light from the curtained windows twinkled and danced on his polished bronze.

Dramatically he wheeled about and left the Prisoner standing alone.

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But his absence was a brief one. Soon he returned and started to pace back and forth, first with dignity, then in a sort of baffled hysteria, then in a kind of petulant irritation, and finally in a mad effort to save himself and Roman justice and the very decencies from total wreckage.

In the end he chose as climax of his scene an act of dramatic irony.

A long time before Lady Macbeth washed and washed her once lily-white hands from blood that would the multitudinous seas incarnadine, Pilate had anticipated Shakespeare.

"Bring water," he commanded, in fine frenzy, and then sat himself down on the public stage of his palace. "See," he said, in effect, addressing the impatient audience that waited with a thirst that only blood could satisfy, "in your presence I shall wash away all my guilt in this matter." With symbolic as well as realistic gestures he rubbed his hands under the water that a servant poured from a gold pitcher into a gold basin. "See? I am guiltless. Let this Man's blood be upon the hands of those who choose the responsibility." The servant may have tossed the used water out over the crowd; that we do not know.

The answer of the priests and the mob is the most dramatic single line ever shouted upon any stage. An audience simply cannot hear it without a frightened shudder. It is the roar of God's own

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chosen people rejecting God. It is a demand that murder be fastened upon them.

Yet as in all great dramatic lines there was an undertone of meaning that even the greatest actor would hardly recognize. The people had clamored for the saving blood of the Saviour, and the eyes of the Prisoner lifted in recognition of their unconscious demand. From that moment on the blood of the Saviour would be flowing upon the world. From His Sacred Heart that precious blood would wash guilty mankind.

Picking up that terrible cue, the Saviour spoke a line that no one heard but that all history was to know and that all Christians were to accept with gratitude.

For in very truth His blood would be upon the children of men and upon their children and their children's children. "This is My blood . . . which shall be shed for many," He had said on that last evening, when He pronounced over the chalice the words of consecration. Now the mob called thirstily for His blood. They asked for the blood of murder, and Christ turned their merciless line into a line of unutterable mercy for themselves. More truly He had anticipated their line and had prepared for it. He had given His blood for the redemption of many. He had promised to shed that blood for the life of the world. He answered their call for blood with a divine generosity. He countered their appeal for guilt with an offer of forgiveness. His blood

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would flow at the hands of murderers . . . but it would flow for the life and salvation of the world.

In that swift scene we seem for a moment to have forgotten Pilate. Indeed in his shameful shrugging-off of guilt he shrinks to a figure pitiful and abashed. He was given a chance for heroism and a challenge to greatness. But the name Caesar now shouted by the mob frightens him and makes him turn aside from his Roman love of justice. He has become as weak as the water into which he dipped inept fingers. His great scene is ended — for he didn't have the courage to play the scene.

Pilate was a commanding figure when he entered the drama of Christ's Passion. Any audience would have stirred expectantly as the torches flashed upon his chased armor and the polished floors echoed under the tread of his booted feet. This was perhaps the very man who would place his steel-encased figure between the guiltless Hero and the guilty pursuers.

But he was a farcical figure when he crawled back into the wings. He had pared down his own character, as he had pared down the proffered role. In the end he too, like Herod, played the buffoon before the people and in an almost ladylike gesture dipped his finger tips into pallid water. There was probably laughter from the mob at his gesture of dipping his fingers in the water. Mobs despise water in any form. It is very likely that they found

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what he did less an act of tragedy than a matter of low comedy.

What a scene he had fluffed!

The lines that were given to him to speak! . . . and he muffed them.

His was the chance to play a scene with God. His own classic dramatists had often dared such a scene — a hero visited by a god, a hero and a god playing together some brave adventure. Pilate missed the whole point.

The Saviour of the world waited upon the possibility that he, Pilate the governor, might save Him.

A kingdom was in the process of establishment, and the swift transfer of his loyalty would have lifted Pilate to heights that Caesar himself could never scale. The men that the King had chosen as His ministers were all in actual flight. Their places had been vacated. The King might well be looking for someone brave enough and farsighted enough to fill the posts these ministers had seemingly deserted.

The King had taken the time and trouble to explain things to him, even to persuade him gently as to his possible fine and profitable course. He had almost humbly given hints of His cause.

And Pilate had been tempted to accept.

He sensed the greatness of the moment, and he swung back and forth between the things he knew and wanted and the things that he guessed and vaguely appraised as worth far more.

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We ourselves have a fierce temptation: we want to rewrite that scene. We want to see it played as it might have been — had Pilate been a hero and not an ambitious poltroon.

Suppose Pilate had accepted the call of Christ.

Suppose he had suddenly, in the gesture reserved for royalty gone on one knee to this new King and lifted his hand in salute.

Suppose through the corridors of the governor's palace his voice had rung out: "Into Your hands, Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews and of all the world, I entrust my fate."

Suppose that on that open porch of judgment, before the priests and the mob — not yet so drunk with blood, torture, and the smell of a dying Hero that they couldn't be swayed by tremendous faith and heroism — the Roman governor had turned the whole scene topsy-turvy. "You may have the only king you claim, Caesar of Rome," he could have shouted at them in cold contempt or blazing joy (there are so many ways to play that scene). "I choose Jesus, King of the Jews."

There would have been a moment of paralyzed silence, the kind of silence that can be the most eloquent line in the play.

Then someone would have cheered, some smart man in the crowd, out of curiosity and in disgust at what he had seen thus far, would shout, "Well chosen, Pilate!" And thousands of voices would have picked up the answer. The heart of the Jewish mob

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would have been flattered. This Roman had chosen one of their own race. This man who had seen the kings of earth, even Caesar, emperor of the civilized world, had preferred to them all a Jew of Jews! Clearly the priests had been wrong. The Man was what He claimed to be.

The pendulous mob would have swung and swayed.

A priest might have leaped up from the panicked priests around him, finding tongue after that frightful slap across the mouth that had been Pilate's act of faith. And he might have shouted, "Pilate is right. Follow his lead. And so shall I."

There could have been an uproar of discordant voices.

Fights might have broken out, as the priests warred with words and the mob with fists.

But the unity of blood lust would have been broken.

And when with a casual gesture Pilate would have loosed his guards upon the mob, resistance would have waned. Some would have fled . . . and those who would have seen in the choice of Pilate the only choice possible for men who had their own best interests at heart would have sifted through the guard of Roman soldiers to find a place in the newly forming army of the Saviour.

Pilate and Christ and the nucleus of a kingdom, the unexpected, tremendous climax of the most

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dramatic scene ever given to a mortal hero to play!

But let's suppose the worst. Let's suppose the mob had surged forward and murdered Pilate for his act of faith.

He would have been with the Holy Innocents and John the Baptist, martyrs who had anticipated by their death the murder of Good Friday.

Or let's suppose that the priests and the mob had gone over Pilate's head and in an appeal to Caesar gained Christ's death, from which nothing would deflect them, Pilate would have entered into the ranks of earth's most outstanding men.

He would be remembered as the one character who in the tragedy of the Passion had aggressively taken the side of Christ. He would have played an inspiring scene. He would have spoken lines that would have echoed through the long course of history.

All his instincts were right.

His quick recognition of the superiority of the Prisoner was spontaneous.

He seemed to glimpse His royalty.

All he had to do to make his role transcendently powerful was to speak an opening line firmly and convincingly:

"You are my King; I am Your man."

Then he needed only to take his stand at the side of the world's greatest Character, and he would instantly have been coupled with Christ, almost as a co-star.

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What a part! The one strong protector of the Saviour throughout the course of His friendless Passion.

That role would have led to a series of others. . . .

He would have had a place in the kingdom that Christ had come to establish — a high place, no doubt of that, perhaps even the highest.

As for that kingdom, here was no patch quilt loosely stitched together by some petty, ruthless Caesar. Pilate would have entered the eternal kingdom of God, where advancement depended, not on trickery, relentless cruelty, cynical disregard for the rights of others, but on love of fellow men and of charity, the greatest of the virtues.

Pilate would have found partnership with the Apostles. Might he even have taken Peter's place? Peter had failed in the hour of Christ's trial. Christ might have transferred his post and prerogatives to the Roman who had stepped forward and proved a heroism that the first chosen chief had failed to show. Pilate would surely have anticipated Paul in this: that he was first apostle to the Gentiles.

In the Litany of the Saints we would be praying today, "St. Pilate, pray for us." His name would be immortally linked with St. Michael, God's warrior angel, and St. George, St. Sebastian, and St. Louis of France.

For a critical moment Pilate teetered between greatness and extinction, between sainthood and

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oblivion. He seemed to be about to take a step that would mean his place in a world-conquering kingdom, perhaps as chief of staff in Christ's army of peace, commander entrusted with the swift advance, no longer governor of a Roman province, but bishop of the eternal Church.

Who can measure all the implications of that change?

The most glorious life beckoned to Pilate.

The new scene, written in splendor and played in high courage, would have overthrown the tragic plot, set at liberty the Hero, and advanced the governor to a star part.

Pilate, protector and bodyguard of the King of kings!

Pilate, prototype of all those brave men who accept the call of Christ and enter His glorious service!

But that is not the scene that Pilate plays.

Instead his speeches fall into confused mumbles. His gestures are futile and exasperated. His character disintegrates with such speed that no one has bothered to write the tragedy of his catastrophe. He lets the sly priests and the ugly mob take right out from his protection the Man he admires. The sweep of the Passion moves on. And Pilate himself runs headlong into ruin.

He steps from the stage of the Passion into disfavor with Caesar, to a rapid deterioration into brutal conduct and slovenly administration of office, into

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exile, to dishonor, and to his end in a suicide death.

Indeed history grew so contemptuous of the man who missed his great dramatic moment that it tells us little that is definite about him from that moment on. As happens to bad actors always, he was the potential star exiled to the dressing rooms. He muffed his lines and stumbled in his actions. He disappeared in the wings, disgraced. We know only that Caesar, who liked men of action and decision, shortly routed him to inferior posts and finally tore up his contract.

In Switzerland the mountain guides point to a deep valley and tell the visitor that into it Pilate flung himself when exile became intolerable and he grew convinced that Caesar, whom he had chosen rather than Christ, had no further parts for him to play.

It's a grim ending for a promising career.

He might have knelt at the feet of Christ; he chose to bootlick for Caesar.

He might have saved the Saviour; he dipped his hands in a basin of water and sent Christ — and himself — out to die.

He might have been one of the world's greatest saints and most dramatic heroes; he showed himself a pitiful weakling incapable of speaking a powerful, convincing line.

He makes his exit from the fluffed scene to the silent contempt of the audience. They have nothing to applaud. Almost they have nothing to boo or hiss.

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They just recognize a piece of superlatively bad acting. They see a great scene ruined. They know that that particular actor will never get another chance to shine like a star in the dramatic sky.

Fortunately for us, here again is a part still open for someone who can play it well.

It constantly calls for a man (or a woman for that matter) who can speak a thrilling line and fling himself into one magnificent gesture.

The part is always open.

Could you or I play it, as Pilate failed to do?

Can we say for all the world to hear: "My King, though all others condemn You, You are my King, and I am Your man"?

Can we take up that challenge?

Let Pilate cling to Caesar, if he will. Let him crawl for the favor of the priests, who hate him, and of the mob, that would gladly tear him to pieces. I make the gesture that acknowledges the majesty of the captive Christ and lay in proud vassalage my service at His feet.

I ask no success but the success that comes in partnership with Christ and no place higher than some post in His kingdom.

Let the men of doubt turn from the God of truth; let the stupid men turn from the Teacher of wisdom. For me He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

I can write my own lines and plot out the action of my own glorious scene.

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“Christ, King of kings and Lord of lords, gentle Ruler of hearts and Master of minds, into Your hands I commend my life, my career, my future, my loyalty, my service — my all.”

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THE lights have been brought far down on God's great celestial dimmer.

It is so dark that I must strain to catch the last scenes of the tragedy. The thunder rolls . . . the earth quakes . . . there are rushing winds and the wail of the elements . . . and I must strain to hear the last words of the actors.

The immobile figures upon the scene grow faint and dim. Against the angry purple and scarlet of the stormy backdrop the tableaued characters stand as if broken in silent grief and paralyzing terror. The priests, taking pretext from the storm and the near accomplishment of their drama, have — like people impatient to leave the theater for fear of heavy rain — fled before the final curtain. The curtain that they unwittingly hurry to see is the torn, discredited curtain that once protected the holy of holies from alien gaze. Today the living holy of holies has been held up for any gaze — rude, alien, blas-

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phemous, hateful, greedy, sinful. No need to hide further the stone and satin holy of holies into which an unworthy priesthood refused entrance to the One who alone could give it full meaning.

In panic the mob began melting in rapid rivulets. The storm cracked its whips of lightning over their heads. The earth under their feet, as if unwilling to support feet that had run in pursuit of a dying God, shook them to fresh terror. The little waves of the more timid had been followed by freshets of other terrified men and women . . . until a rushing wall of humanity fell back, receding from the hill up which the tidal wave of sin and death had poured.

They were afraid of a dying God whom they had not hesitated to crucify. At the height of His strength they dared His majesty; as death closed in, they seemed to fear that the grim enemy would reach out to fold them too in its skeleton arms. The very murderers that had dared Him to work a miracle now trembled as they feared that He might . . . and feared still more that for some inscrutable plan of His own He wouldn't.

The soldier executioners continued to stand as they would under a flight of enemy arrows. Discipline kept them firm. They were afraid, but they had been taught not to admit their fear even to themselves. Yet even the strongest Roman training could not stop the sick quivering of their stomachs,

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which echoed the quivering of the shock-rocked earth.

The great stage manager had pulled out the mighty control board in every device of natural panic. Lightning stabbed at the murderous hill. The storm sang its threnody of death. The earth, sick unto death that the blood of God had watered it, swayed and reeled, drunk with the awful drink forced upon it.

Quietly immobile, unafraid because they had long since seen the worst that man could do to God, the faithful characters close in around the cross. No fear assails them. The flight of the others comes almost like relief; they can now without hindrance draw very near to the almost dead Saviour. The stage is almost deserted now, leaving to His Mother and John, to the faithful women, to the thief who hoped, and to the centurion, who had already known the stirrings of belief, space and time for a last sweet scene of farewell and expectant love.

The curtain seems to be slowly, slowly, slowly falling.

The tragedy closes around the Hero as He sinks in that final dramatic catastrophe, His death.

Then suddenly as I strain in order that I lose nothing of the drama's final curtain, I note another character entering the stage. Has he just arrived on

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the scene? Or has he been hidden all the time in the pressure of the mobs?

I can't be sure as yet; no spotlight hits him and no skillful lighting picks him out. With difficulty I can make out the blur of his features; his costume seems a nondescript blend of a dozen others.

Yet even in the darkness I can sort out details and make sense of his face and form. Each detail strikes me with an appalling sense of familiarity. The lips of that strange new figure are still puckered in the kiss of Judas. That mouth still twitches in Peter's shameful denial. The fellow, for all his hodgepodge of garments, seems to wear his costumes with the worldly pride of the priests. He speaks briefly. The words are mere echoes, but they are the hoarse echoes of what the crowd has been shouting all afternoon.

His gestures are vacillating, indecisive, a mirror-like repetition of what Pilate did. But as a flash of lightning blazes across the scene, I can see his hands, and he is rubbing them. There is blood upon his hands, fresh red blood that the water in which he pretends to wash has not so much as diluted.

Another horrifying flash of lightning, the brightest of the storm, and every detail of the figure stands out in sharp, outlined, vivid white. In that blaze I see clearly and with sick terror the identity of this new figure that appears belatedly but does appear for the death of God's Son. His features are too horribly clear. Every line of his figure is too, too familiar.

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For the newcomer is — myself.

I am walking upon the stage of Calvary.

I had not seen my name on the program of the Passion, but cleverly I had written it in.

Over me is flung the red shadow of the cross and its burden. The red sky of Good Friday tints me as with the stain of Good Friday's blood.

"It is I, Lord."

There into the tragedy of Calvary I have walked to play my part.

I have come for the kill. I am there for the final curtain, which is slowly being rung down upon the death of my God.

Then over me the voice of Christ rings out: "It is consummated. . . . Father, into Thy hands I commend My spirit."

The last line of the world drama is spoken as if to greet the intruder upon the stage. Against the dissonant harmony of wind and thunder and the snare-drum rattle of the rain the Hero speaks the final line. The King has given His own soul its imperial release. Creator that He is, Christ surrenders His spirit into the hands of the Father, who accepts it with the work that Jesus had come to earth to complete.

His drama is done.

His love story is quite completed.

The tragedy has come to its brutal end.

The struggle of good with evil is over. Mankind

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has broken the Sacred Heart. The Saviour has bowed His head to the incredible fact, climactic in history: that sin would, given power, rise in any age and among any people to snuff out virtue and kill the Son of God.

The curtain continues its dark descent.

But the Hero was given the last line.

At the very end He dominates the stage and binds the whole drama together in a phrase of infinite meaning and inexhaustible significance.

For indeed and indeed the Hero's work is completed.

Man has completed the tragedy of wickedness . . . and God has rounded out the blessed drama of His love.

The long, beautiful, terrifying story of creation and paradise, fall and rise, God's question and man's rejection, reached its sublime climax when sinners laid their hands upon the throat of Innocence Incarnate and strangled the life of God. The search of the Saviour for human souls led Him up the hill of Calvary and onto the watchtower of the cross. The life of service was complemented and completed by the death of unutterable love.

Christ's scene is played to its splendid close.

Yet my part in the tragedy is in a way ended too.

With Judas I set the stage for tragedy when I betrayed Him.

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My voice rasped the ugly lines of denial when I played the part of Peter and spoke his curses and his fierce rejection of my Lord and Saviour.

Long after the mob had drained away, my sickly voice repeated the cry of death and sin's everlasting blasphemy.

Herod's cynical role of libertine so fascinated me that I saw the dancing girl and could not see the pure Christ.

Pilate's cynicism and ambitious love of power and glory made me muff my chance to speak heroic lines and make manly gestures; discredited in my mis-handling of the part, I had stumbled from the stage — to hisses and the terrifying silence of a disappointed audience.

On my soiled and guilty hands, defying the purifying power of water or pitiful apology, is the blood of a murdered God.

The final curtain falls with a soft thud into place.

The tragedy of Calvary is now completely over.

But at precisely that second with a shout of joy I realize the glorious truth: Calvary is not a finished drama. It is not a play rounded to completion, as other tragedies are, by the fall of the curtain.

Rather was it just a prologue — all this that I have seen and heard and been a part of. Here is merely another act in the long drama of the human soul.

True the Hero is briefly dead. God has played His full part to a perfect conclusion of this scene.

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But the play goes on, and my realest part in it remains still to be played.

Suddenly I see how the whole cast of characters splits in half. There is the truly tragic group for whom the fall of the curtain is indeed the end. Priests and mob, Pilate and Herod, Judas and the soldiers — for them the play is over. They have fled to the dressing rooms, torn off their make-up, hidden away their villain costumes. They are exhausted with what they have done, conscious that for them the play is a total failure.

But there is an utterly, beautifully different group.

For them — for Mary and the Magdalen, for John and the holy women, for Dismas the Good Thief and Longinus the centurion, for the Apostles (already turning toward repentance and shortly to speak new lines of sorrow) the falling curtain indicates only a brief intermission.

Soon it rises on another act, the real act: Easter and the Resurrection.

For these happy characters the end of this act has been only the beginning of life's glorious comedy.

The backdrop will begin to glow; the lights on the board will come on; the orchestra will pick up the theme of Alleluia; and the drama of death will give place to the glorious drama of life eternal.

So will it be for the Apostles. They will regather. First in abased humility and then in rising confi-

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dence they will re-form their shattered ranks. Their faith, which had never been dead, will awake in the rush of Easter's dawn. Their hope, apparently paralyzed, will know the reassuring confirmation of the Resurrection.

With new and thrilling love for the Saviour they will speak lines of power and poetry. Their stage will broaden to the limits of the world. They will speak before delighted audiences and after the gaiety of martyrdom will make their appearance before the applauding angels and saints of God.

Mary Magdalen will glimpse through her tears the glorious love drama that will occupy the remaining years of her life.

John will graduate from his youthful role to mature, rich manhood. He will rise to the dramatic heights of the fourth Gospel and sketch out the celestial pageant of the Apocalypse.

And Mary? From the darkness of Good Friday she moves into the warm, golden light of Easter. She lays aside her role as Mother of sorrows to become Mother of the sorrowing. She is always the Mother of the Son of Man, but she takes up woman's most ample assignment — motherhood of all the sons and daughters of men. The stage is already set for the glorious pageant that ends and begins when she is crowned queen of heaven and mistress of earth.

Centuries of inspiration and example are to be hers.

A thousand painters will paint her in a thousand different poses — loving her because she is the fairest

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of the daughters of Eve. Her greatest role will be that of Queen Mother. Her beauty will make her play in uncounted revivals, eternal queen of May.

So we realize with a throb of joy that the tragedy of Calvary only seems to be the end.

For the villains the final curtain well may be the end. Villainy and sin go down inevitably to catastrophe.

But for you and for me and for anyone else who wants a joyous place in the drama of God and men, the loveliest roles still remain to be played.

Let Judas slink off into the wings, halter in hand.

Let Pilate rush to his melodramatic suicide down the steep incline that might symbolize his rapid descent in power and the disfavor of Caesar.

Let the priests stand helpless in the Temple, which is already disintegrating around them, and wonder why the halls seem empty and the walls doomed. The divine Hero will never play there the role for which that Temple was built. Soon the doors of that Temple will close forever. The preliminary drama of sacrifice and Old Testament ritual no longer have meaning.

Let Herod stumble into his rotten grave; clammy death soon finds the body of the libertine.

I want no part with any of those characters, with their lines or their gestures.

I am slated for a role of glorious comedy.

HIS PASSION FOREVER

I shall walk forward in the faith of Peter and the love of John.

I shall know the repentance of Magdalen, the hope of Dismas, the shining certainties of Longinus.

I shall join a new chorus, the chorus of the Apostles as their voices rise in songs of victory and in the dramatic telling of death and Resurrection.

I shall know the arms of Mary around me, and I shall play that small but happy part as I offer to her the slender protection of my filial love.

For me Calvary is only Act One . . . Easter is Act Two. Act Three shall be played, please God, upon the glorious stage of heaven.

That stage is already set. Many who played in the tragedy of Calvary have found their parts in the comedy of paradise.

The unchanging Hero dominates the stage from its very center, now not upon a scarlet throne of shame, but on the white and shining throne of Him who rules the world He made and redeemed.

Unlike merely mortal actors I can choose my own role and accept the lovely lines written for me by the divine Author. I can add to them lines of my own composing, lines of love and loyalty and life.

My life need have only the shadow of minor tragedies, only the tears that make brighter the laughter and joy at curtain's fall. For life was meant to be and well can be a happy comedy.

LAST TO ENTER THE SCENE

Let me speak my lines bravely and with sincere eloquence.

Let me make my gestures as God would have me make them.

Let me, gracious Hero of Calvary, move steadily through scene after scene to Your outstretched arms and the welcoming home-coming in the house of my Father and my King.